いちばんうしろの大魔王 ACT7

水城正太郎

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HJ文庫

HOBBY JAPAN

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２Ｖは仮想異空間内での阿九斗抹殺計画を実行に移すため、天才研究者・木多淑恵を巻き込むことに成功する。学院ごと淑恵の作ったゲーム世界に取り込まれてしまった阿九斗は生徒を救うため、そしてゲームをクリアするために、魔王として生徒と戦う破目になってしまう。しかし仮想空間内には、さらにルールを超える隠された秘密があった。

HOBBY JAPAN

いちばんうしろの
大魔王
ACT7

「……いや、君、意外と楽しんでるだろ」
けーな
クラス：神官
HP 20/20
Lv：10
筋力： 6
魔力：18
兵力： 10000
阿九斗
クラス：魔王
HP 9999/9999
Lv：99
筋力：25
魔力：25
兵力：200000

「ご命令をいただければ、この魔将軍ころね、反逆者どもを血祭りにあげて差し上げます」
ころね
クラス：魔術師
HP 200/200
Lv：20
筋力：15
魔力：20
兵力：100000

「封印の地に足を踏み入れることは何人たりともまかりらん」
少女がどこか幼い声をあげた。

登場人物紹介

ころね

阿九斗の監視と護衛を行なう人造人間。ポシェットから秘密な道具を取り出し使用する。阿九斗をからかうのが大好き。

曾我(そが)けーな

落ちこぼれな天然少女で阿九斗に懐いている。お米が大好き。魔法は苦手だが空を飛ぶことと姿を消すことはできる。

紗伊阿九斗(さいあくと)

将来「魔王」になると(再び?)予言された「善良な」主人公。魔王戦争も一段落したところだが彼の困難は続く。

服部絢子（はっとりじゅんこ）

阿九斗に想いを寄せる一途で純情なクラス委員長。伊賀出身の忍者娘でカエルが苦手。

江藤不二子（えとうふじこ）

阿九斗に忠誠を誓った黒魔術師にして薬物使い。学園のマドンナとして君臨するが実は陰謀が大好き。

リリィ白石（しらいし）

コンスタン魔術学院生徒会長。帽子がトレードマーク。喧嘩っ早く「小さい」と言われると切れてしまう。

三輪寛（みわひろし）

阿九斗の弟分を名乗るトラブルメイカー。阿九斗の発言をいちいち誤解し阿九斗の悪名を高めるのに一役を買っている。

Prologue

A certain genius girl did not think of herself as a genius.

Kita Yoshie worked under her father, who was the high priest of the god Megis, while also immersing herself in the math, video games, and programming she did for fun. And she did all this while only 17 years old.

At the age of eight, she had stopped reading storybooks and become interested in poetry and math, but she quickly read all of the well-known works. In order to read poetry in other languages, she taught herself several languages using an assortment of different books, and by the age of 10, she had learned seven languages. Due to the books she read in that process, she had already learned what one would normally learn in school. The empire's schools did not allow one to skip grades, so she grew sick of school there and transferred overseas. She graduated university at 15 and returned, hoping to become a high priest. However, she finally realized that graduation from a magic school was needed for that position.

She decided reentering an academy would be a waste of time, so she asked her father to work as his assistant. She decided to participate in government in her own way by constructing an ideal society in which everyone could live fulfilling their interests and hobbies.

Yoshie began by posting on online political message boards with a false name and debating various issues there. She knew most of those debates ended with futilely flinging insults at each other, but she still succeeded in making a name for herself.

She made a name for herself online using the male name Yoshihiko.

No matter how far communications technology advanced, the people of the empire would not reveal their identities to anyone but the gods. It was taboo to expose personal information or one's unhidden face and Yoshie used that fact to its fullest.

After about a year, a page run by Yoshihiko gained political influence and his opinions and research became well known.

Yoshihiko proclaimed the extreme idea of constructing a society where everyone could live without any motivation. His ideas were said to be nonsense, but the research he put into accomplishing it gathered attention from others in that field.

That field was virtual alternate dimension research.

The virtual alternate dimension was commonly referred to as a 4th dimensional space. Researchers' understanding of it was as follows: "we don't know why, but there is an infinitely vast space adjacent to our dimension." It was thought to be dangerous to remain within it, so it was usually used to temporarily transfer oneself or objects or to trap intruders as a defensive panic room.

Yoshie (and therefore Yoshihiko) thought the virtual alternate dimension might be controllable and had been conducting research. She had announced a few pieces of data that made her suspect that space could actually be changed as much as necessary by a human will.

For that reason, the military, political, and financial worlds had all focused on her research. If the space could be used effectively, its value would be incalculable. However, that research was a means to achieve Yoshie's goal as well. She was convinced she could create a world where one could live while doing nothing but sleep all day. She wanted a world where every imperial citizen could laze around all day without issue.

She did not realize the true importance of her research. Also, she did not think of herself as a genius. No one would have thought those two things would come together and lead to her taking a drastic action.

On that day, Yoshie was receiving a government worker.

That in itself was not unusual. She was officially nothing more than a clerk who carried out routine tasks for the god Megis.

She wore multipurpose goggles over her unkempt hair and her expression was somewhat vacant. Yoshie was sitting in a café within the temple of Megis. The interior was splendidly made as the greatest common divisor of many different religious styles. It looked like a mixture of Greek, Baroque, and Muslim. That was simply how the temple of Megis was made.

Sitting in front of Yoshie was a man who could only be described as a salaryman. He wore a gray suit and had his hair parted on the side. His face was the kind one would forget after taking a few steps away from him. Yoshie had asked his name, but she had already forgotten even that.

However, Yoshie's eyes opened wide when she heard what he said after a simple greeting.

"I would like you to create a program that can control the virtual alternate dimension."

Yoshie had not announced she was Yoshihiko. She had indeed pursued working on the programs of the gods, but very few people knew she was a genius in that field because most of her schooling had been done overseas. No one should have been requesting she write a program. Unless, of course, they had realized she was Yoshihiko.

"Is that an official request to the temple of Megis?" asked Yoshie to feign ignorance.

She had been told this meeting concerned a preliminary adjustment from the government. It was only natural to assume the request was directed toward the temple and not toward her. Then again, this man's tone of voice had not held that nuance at all.

"No, this is a request for you, Yoshihiko-san," readily declared the salaryman, showing he had no intention of beating around the bush.

Yoshie readily accepted this turn of events. She naturally disliked putting in any unneeded effort.

"I see. I would like to know for sure whether this is an official or unofficial issue. I was initially told this was a request from the government."

"It is official. This job comes from the government. Specifically, the Cabinet Office. It is a top secret job, though."

"Top secret? I'd prefer it if you avoided that kind of unclear word. What do you mean?"

"This is an unofficial project from the government. It was me personally that realized you are Yoshihiko. Is that enough?"

The salaryman smiled.

Yoshie nodded in admiration.

"Ohh, that's amazing. So someone figured it out. Then can you tell me who you are? That smile looks unnatural to me, so I get the feeling you're hiding something."

Yoshie spoke bluntly because she was not the type to hold back about being direct. The salaryman's smile deepened and he created a V-sign

with each hand. Most people would feel they were being mocked, but Yoshie smiled in amusement.

"Oh? Most people get angry when I do this. That reaction is rare."

"What's wrong with that? I just thought it was funny."

"I am glad to hear it. I suppose there is a first time for everything. At any rate, this is my codename. I am known as 2V."

"2V of the cabinet's intelligence office. I've heard of you."

Yoshie recognized the name. Naturally, she had only heard rumors from the government workers she dealt with in her work. 2V's face had never been seen in public.

"Yes. I apologize for using a codename, but it should not be a problem because this name works well enough most of the time."

2V's tone grew more informal. Yoshie felt as if she were speaking with someone similar to herself.

"That's fine, but how did you find out about me?"

"I had someone track down the location of the transmissions. That is a power only a member of the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office can take advantage of."

"I see. But if you can do that much, do you even need me? But if you have a good deal for me, I am willing to listen."

"I of course have a good deal for you. I have no idea what a normal person would think of it, though."

"I'm shocked you would imply I'm not normal."

"My apologies. But it is true, isn't it? Anyway, the 'good deal' I have for you is this."

2V slid a mana screen toward Yoshie. She spread it out before her eyes and read through the text.

It was information from a spy inside Constant Magic Academy. That said, this so-called spy was actually an official student that had entered the academy through the official procedures. They were merely promised a job after graduation if they reported on information within the academy.

"Fwohh! This is…!" cried out Yoshie in surprise.

Several people had been sealed within the virtual alternate dimension using Soga Keena as an intermediary. Also, the virtual alternate dimension had been altered by a free will. Yoshie instantly understood the implications of this.

"Amazing, isn't it? Truly amazing."

"It is, it is," said Yoshie as she nodded repeatedly.

"It means there seems to be a way of controlling the virtual alternate dimension. And we are beginning to understand how to do so," said 2V.

Yoshie immediately responded.

"Is it this Soga Keena person? Did her unique mana waves cause this?"

"It seems so. She can apparently alter the virtual alternate dimension. If we could copy her mana waves…"

By the time 2V got that far, Yoshie had already pulled her goggles down and begun thinking with 2V's report in hand. She was muttering something.

"Fwohhh! This is getting interesting. So many ideas are coming to mind. If I could implement it with a program, I might be able to create a dimension where everyone can just laze around all day."

2V shrugged and slid a mana screen toward Yoshie that contained contact information.

"You seem motivated enough, but please contact me just in case."

And then 2V left.

Technically, 2V did not leave from in front of Yoshie.

2V's will could be transferred between many different dolls. That will had moved on to a different doll.

2V specialized in a method of controlling several dolls, which were artificial humans with no will of their own. The dolls not being actively controlled could carry out simple autonomous actions.

2V had just transferred to a doll standing in a lab at Imperial University. That doll was waiting for a man in a lab coat to speak. That man was

leaning forward in the cramped space between a rectangular device similar to a white refrigerator and a steel rack.

The man in the lab coat was reading the values displayed on the refrigerator-like machine's screen and he spoke without turning around.

"So, 2V. You say these are cells from the demon king's body?"

"Yes. I believe they are real. As I said, be careful with the mana waves emitted by them," said 2V.

This doll also looked like a fairly forgettable salaryman.

These demon king cells had been stolen by the man known as Rubbers who also belonged to the Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office or CIMO 8. The cells had been cultivated from Sai Akuto, who was to become the demon king.

"The mana waves aren't useful for anything other than using demonic beasts, but I did find something interesting."

The man in the lab coat turned around and tossed a mana screen toward 2V.

He was also a member of CIMO 8. The footage he tossed over contained a map and some data.

"I recognized this mana wave pattern, so I did some research."

"So what's with the map? Will I understand once I read the data?"

"You're as lazy as ever. At least read the data first. But I guess it would be hard to understand without some explanation. That is where the demon king was born."

"Where he was born? You mean he's human, too?"

"No, that isn't what I mean. I'm referring to the very first demon king."

2V gave a whistle at that.

"Wow. So it's hereditary."

"Don't jokingly say inaccurate things. It pisses me off."

"Yes, I understand, I understand. You mean he is a weapon created by someone."

"Exactly. I still don't know if the current demon king happened to have a bomb in his genes or is a product of artificial insemination, but that is the place where the original monster created to emit those mana waves was born."

"I see. So is he still there at…um…the place on this map?" asked 2V.

The man in the lab coat tilted his head.

"Most likely. All I can say for sure is the original was born there. There might be more in the files at the temple of Megis."

"Hm. This just got a lot more interesting."

"Do you see a lot of profit in this? That's what you're ultimately after, right?"

"No, no. This looks a bit more interesting than that. At any rate, just wait a bit longer. I think I'll be able to get some interesting results."

2V grinned.

Chapter 1: A Surprising Health Examination

Akuto had no good memories when it came to health examinations.

This was of course due to being labeled a future demon king during the examination upon entering the school.

"Having a surprise health examination is odd," said Hiroshi as they stood lined up in the infirmary while wearing only their underwear.

"It does make you wonder," replied Akuto.

For some reason, a health examination had been suddenly announced that morning. The students had been confused but still underwent the examination. The boys were going first and about half of the line had finished already.

"They're taking blood?"

The student in front of Akuto held his right arm out toward the doctor. A syringe took about half a test tube of blood.

"Aniki, do you not like needles?" asked Hiroshi with a grin.

"Well, they hurt," replied Akuto seriously.

Hiroshi had not expected that answer, so he could only stare blankly back.

"Aniki, I thought you were the type to charge directly into high-temperature plasma and to rip off your own arm."

"If it hurts, it hurts."

"Ehh?"

As they spoke, Akuto's turn came. The needle pierced his outstretched arm and he grimaced in pain.

"D-did it hurt?" asked Hiroshi.

"It hurt," answered Akuto plainly.

Their conversation was on the level of elementary school students, but the boys' examination ended without issue.

"I'm glad nothing happened. There has been so much going on lately that I thought someone had to be plotting something when I heard about a sudden health examination."

Akuto spoke with Hiroshi as he put on his clothes and went outside to wait for the girls to finish their examination.

"It's true that something more could be going on when you're involved, aniki. In fact, it feels somehow lacking when nothing happens."

"I hate that I can't deny that."

Akuto's shoulders drooped.

And then Akuto spotted some suspicious figures behind the school building. He glanced toward Hiroshi and the other boy nodded in understanding.

"Looks like something really is happening."

"Don't joke. But we can't just ignore it."

The figures were moving along while trying to remain hidden. They moved from the thicket behind the building and hid behind a pillar of the building. It seemed to be a group of two.

Akuto and Hiroshi began moving while making sure the pair could not see them.

The pair seemed to be using a camouflage cloak to hide themselves. The cloak could not completely hide them, but it would detect the surrounding colors and transform to similar colors.

"I'll circle around. Aniki, you blow them up after I scare them your way," whispered Hiroshi.

"I'm not so sure about 'blowing them up', but I do think we need to keep them from running away and ask them what they're doing here. We can use your plan for that," agreed Akuto.

Hiroshi made a wide circle around the thicket to reach the opposite side. He nodded so Akuto could see, waited for the perfect timing, and used magic to create the sound of a siren.

"Waaah!"

The pair wearing a camouflage cloak shouted in surprise and began to run away from Hiroshi. The colors of the school building being displayed on the cloak shifted and their position grew vaguely visible.

They tried to flee but found Akuto standing before them.

"Wait. Don't run. Who are you?"

The pair panicked when Akuto appeared before them and spoke. They completely lost control of themselves.

"W-waaah! It's him!" they shouted and fired magical light bullets at Akuto without warning.

"Dammit!"

Akuto reflexively raised a hand. It was nothing more than a bad habit of his, but he was bad at controlling his power. Also, he was the type to negate an attack with a more powerful one rather than to defend against it.

And as a result…

A brilliant light and an explosive noise filled the surrounding area. Akuto's magic light bullet blew away the one fired by the pair and continued on toward the pair without slowing.

—Oh, no!

So as not to hurt the pair, Akuto immediately caused the power forming the light bullet to scatter.

The pair covered their face. A ring of energy surrounding them shot to the side.

That ring of energy struck the wall of the school building.

The pair stood frozen while covering their faces. Once they realized they felt no pain, they checked and were relieved to find they were not hurt.

Akuto was relieved as well. He had managed to avoid injuring them.

"I did not intend to surprise you like that. But I saw you using that camouflage cloak and wondered-…"

Akuto trailed off as he heard an odd rumbling noise.

—Eh? What?

His question was quickly answered.

The wall of the school building was collapsing toward the pair. The ring of energy had left a clean crack where it had struck. This had cut out a circular portion of the wall.

"Waaah!"

The pair jumped out of the way.

The wall fell and produced a low, heavy noise. The pair and Akuto were both at a loss for words, but the situation did not end there.

Many naked girls appeared before Akuto's eyes.

Technically, they had not appeared. He had merely blown a hole in the wall to the girls' health inspection room, but it took Akuto a fair bit of time to realize that. And it also took the naked girls a while to grasp what had happened. For a full five seconds, they stood still, not covering themselves and leaving every inch of their nude bodies exposed.

"Oh… So it was to peek on the girls."

Akuto finally realized what the pair had been trying to do. However, that was not what he should have been saying.

"Kyaaaaaaaaah! Noooooo!"

Several screams filled the air around him and many different objects were thrown at him. He tried to apologize while blocking those objects with his hands, but he was cut off by an even louder voice.

"Sai Akuto! You act so shamelessly each and every time!"

A girl quickly threw on the outer layer of her uniform to cover her nudity and pointed a wooden sword toward Akuto. She was Hattori Junko.

"No, there is a good reason for this…"

"What good reason is there to peek so boldly that you destroy the wall!?"

"Listen to me. I was not trying to peek."

"You just said 'it was to peek on the girls'! You had clearly just recalled your original goal after growing so excited you destroyed the wall and lost sight of that goal!"

"No, I wasn't the one trying to peek."

Akuto glanced around to ask the pair to explain the situation, but they had run off. Hiroshi was also nowhere to be found.

"Huh? They're gone…"

"Do not try to play dumb!"

"I'm not. They really were here."

"Stop trying to argue!"

Junko swung her wooden sword. Akuto was unable to avoid it. The magic power filling the sword caused an explosion that blasted Akuto high into the sky.

"I thought taking the blood first would have made some people suspicious," said Yoshie as she walked through the schoolyard while dressed like a nurse.

A doctor in a white coat walked alongside her. That generic-faced doctor was one of 2V's dolls. He was grinning while lightly tapping the trunk in his hand.

"We just need to escape now, so it shouldn't be a problem. We have what we came for."

"Yes, Soga Keena's blood," muttered Yoshie.

"Who would think they would have a health examination at such a convenient time. This went quite well. Now, I will take this back with me and send you the sample later," said 2V.

Yoshie nodded, but suddenly looked behind her. She had heard an explosion.

"Did something happen?"

Yoshie was worried, but 2V shook his head.

"Stop. You must not worry about anything other than your objective at times like this. Then again, you only came along to see Soga Keena for yourself. You were mostly just a spectator in the first place." 2V thought for

a moment longer and then nodded. "I will leave now, but you do as you wish. Just don't tell anyone what you were here for if they ask."

Yoshie nodded and walked toward the explosion she had heard.

Yoshie could be very curious. That had supported her intelligence. What she finally found behind the school building was something that satisfied her curiosity quite well.

A tall boy lay collapsed in a thicket with smoke rising from his body.

"What happened to cause this?" asked Yoshie as she looked down at Akuto.

Akuto looked up at her.

"It would only make this more complicated if I explained it. At any rate, I'm not hurt."

Akuto stood up. He had several small injuries and a perfect trail of blood flowed down his forehead.

"Looking like that, I can only think you are trying to act tough when you say you aren't hurt."

Yoshie's comment was completely right, but Akuto shook his head.

"I know why you would think that, but my body is tougher than most people's."

"Really?"

Yoshie tore off a piece of her white coat and used a hand motion to tell Akuto to crouch down.

"You didn't have to tear your clothes…"

Akuto was confused, but Yoshie nodded as if it were nothing.

"This coat is nothing more than a tool. Also, it isn't mine. So don't worry about it."

"I suppose that makes sense."

Akuto crouched down and looked at Yoshie's face more closely.

He had not noticed at first glance, but she had a well-featured face. He had not noticed because each individual part was not too noticeable on its own. It was a plain face, but one noticed its good points as one stared at it.

She wore goggles over her minimally groomed hair. Mana screens could be made anywhere, so not many people went out of their way to use projection devices like that. That seemed to say something about her personality. Her way of doing things was to use that device which had been customized to hold the exact functions she needed. This made her look something like a literary girl.

Yoshie placed the torn portion of her coat on Akuto's cheek and wiped up the blood and dirt. She then brought her face in close to his.

"Ah…"

Akuto pulled his head back.

"Could you stay still? I can't see."

Yoshie seemed to be filled with curiosity as she held Akuto's head in place with her hands. She was close enough for him to feel her breath on his face, but she did not seem to mind as she continued observing his face up close.

"Wh-what are you doing…?" asked Akuto with a blush.

"Fwohhh!" cried Yoshie. "Ohhh! Your wounds are healing!"

Yoshie ran a finger across Akuto's cheek. She traced that finger along a wound that was disappearing before her eyes.

"Amazing. Do you have an item equipped that gives you regen? At any rate, this is amazing. So were you born with this?"

"It seems I was. As I said, my body is tougher than most people's."

"Amazing. This is fascinating."

Yoshie's eyes sparkled as she stared at Akuto's face.

"Could you stop that? You're making me blush. Also, what is regen?"

"Ohhh, sorry. I just got a bit excited. Now I'm embarrassed. Regen is a term used in games to refer to health regeneration. Do you play video games?"

Yoshie moved away and smiled at Akuto.

"No, I never have. I've always been too busy. Are they fun?" asked Akuto.

Yoshie gave a large nod.

"Of course! They aren't all that popular these days, though. I think games are a type of culture. There's even an old saying that says 'no more than 24 hours of gaming a day'."

"What does that mean?"

"No matter how much you try, you can unfortunately only play video games for 24 hours in a day. Basically, it means they're so fun you want to play more."

"I see. Maybe I should try it sometime."

"You should. You definitely should," declared Yoshie strongly.

"Thanks for the advice," said Akuto with a nod.

When Yoshie saw that, she gave a deeply emotional nod in return.

"You're the first person who has appreciated what I said. Normally, people are driven away."

"Driven away?"

"Well, boys will try to talk to me sometimes, you know? And when we start talking, I begin talking about video games, right? When I do, they gradually move away. They literally do start moving away from me. And the worst ones say they didn't think I was this kind of girl when they saw me."

Yoshie emphasized her embarrassing experiences with odd enthusiasm. It sounded like she was bragging about how awkward she was, so most people who had made it this far into the conversation would have started to move away as well.

But Akuto gave a forceful nod.

"I know what you mean. It was the same for me at my jobs and in middle school. The girls would try to talk to me, but after a while they would say they didn't think I was this kind of guy."

"Fwohh! Wow! You're the first person to ever understand me! Hey, hey. What's your name?"

Yoshie leaned forward.

"Sai Akuto," replied Akuto.

Yoshie grabbed his hand.

"Kita Yoshie! This is great. We should play an online game together sometime."

"Fine, but when?"

"How about for an entire week starting tomorrow? I can do it while I work, so that's no problem."

Yoshie's request was absolutely ridiculous, but it was normal for her. She always had a game running on one corner of her screen.

But on this point alone, Akuto was a normal person.

"No, that would be difficult for me. I have classes and my everyday life. By the way, does that white coat mean you're a nurse? Surely that job keeps you busy."

That reminded Yoshie of why she had come. She could not say they had needed a sample of Soga Keena's blood to cause a change in the virtual alternate dimension. That alone was illegal because they had not gotten her permission. However, Yoshie decided telling the truth was better than lying when it came to her own profession.

"I guess you could say I'm only temporarily helping out as a nurse. I normally work in the temple of Megis."

Akuto looked back at Yoshie with an impressed look.

"Excuse me, but you are about the same age as me, aren't you?"

"I went to university overseas. Unfortunately, that means I am not qualified to work as a priest, but going back to school would be too much of a pain."

"You must be smart."

Akuto's eyes opened wide in admiration.

Yoshie smiled awkwardly.

"Stop that. People who find school to be a pain aren't considered smart in this country. Actually, I suppose they aren't overseas either. No matter where I go, the desire to only do the things I enjoy isn't welcomed."

"The things you enjoy? Like video games?"

"There is that, but I generally dislike troublesome things. I dislike sweaty things and people with a lot of motivation," said Yoshie while scratching at her head.

"I kind of understand what you mean. People get so obsessed with things that have no real meaning and they waste so much money," said Akuto.

Yoshie's eyes began to sparkle even more.

"You're just getting more and more perfect! That's right. I can't stand that kind of meaningless friendship. If there's a reason for it, fine, but I just can't understand the types that want to commit crimes or get into fights."

"Come to think of it, in a world where we have most everything we need, attempts to hurt other people are attempts to see others' reactions and get to know them better. I understand what you mean."

Akuto nodded in understanding.

Yoshie's words grew even more rapid.

"You really do understand! That's why I can't just chat with people no matter how curious I am. We meet each other, greet each other, and then…what else is there? I wouldn't mind if we could talk about politics or something, but most people seeking that kind of friendship are so ignorant."

"I know what you mean. In other words…"

Yoshie and Akuto's passionate conversation continued. This was the first time Yoshie had experienced this and the same could be said for Akuto. As they held that conversation which was oddly out of sync with the rest of the world, they looked like scientists with no laboratory. However, the slight flush to their faces also made them look like lovers continually talking at the fork in their paths home because they did not want to part.

The two of them seemed to lose track of time. When the bell finally rang, they looked around in sudden realization, exchanged a glance, and smiled at each other.

"Well, that was fun. I'll contact you again sometime. And that isn't just a social nicety; I mean it."

"Thanks. It was fun for me too. Anyway, I have to get to class."

Yoshie and Akuto shook hands.

They began walking in their respective directions and realized a while later that they had not exchanged contact information.

—Well, I guess it isn't a problem. I get the feeling I'll meet him again soon. After all, I've never met someone so interesting. There has to be something here.

As Yoshie thought to herself, she nodded in self-satisfaction.

<President, the pursuit is going well, arinsu.>

An oddly accented voice arrived via telepathy.

This was Constant Magic Academy's student council room. Naturally, it was the student council president who was receiving the telepathic communication.

A short girl in a stylish hat – Lily Shiraishi – nodded in front of a mana screen.

"Don't let your guard down. This is a doll you're following. We have no way of knowing how he'll try to escape."

<I have sent out a great number of bats to act as my eyes. I can make no guarantees, though.>

"If you lose him, I'll kill you," said Lily concisely but with great seriousness.

<Please give me a break, arinsu…>

Lily had been speaking with Ootake Michie, the vice president. The girl displayed on the mana screen seemed to be in a city park. She was slender and pale, so she was reminiscent of a vampire. She could freely control magical machines modeled after bats.

Michie was tracking 2V on the president's orders. No one would take notice of the bats in the city as the sun set, so they were perfect for tracking someone.

"I doubt we'll find 2V's headquarters, but we need to at least catch the very end of his tail," said Lily enthusiastically.

She had only recently learned of this plan. Lily's father was a priest of Megis, so he had been able to obtain information on the plan 2V had Yoshie working on. 2V planned on using the virtual alternate dimension expanded around the temple of Megis, so cooperation from the temple had been necessary. Also, this plan was backed by the radicals who wished to

eliminate the demon king. 2V may have specialized in covert operations, but he had been forced to bring information to the surface this time.

Lily had learned the plan involved obtaining Keena's cells and using the mana waves they produced to seal Akuto in the virtual alternate dimension. She had hurriedly held a health examination and laid the trap. As planned, 2V had arrived to obtain Keena's blood. Lily had not known what 2V would look like, but she had only needed to pursue the person who carried out Keena's blood.

So far, 2V had fallen for the trap splendidly.

<President, he entered a building,> reported Michie.

"Can you follow him inside?"

<I will try. Let's see. The building is the scientific research building of Imperial University, arinsu.>

"Figure out what lab he entered by any means necessary!"

<By any means necessary? Well, I will do my best, arinsu…>

After saying she would try for a bit longer, Michie ended the telepathic connection.

"Now then. How is the girl doing?" muttered Lily.

She made a new telepathic connection. A girl with a wild face appeared on the mana screen.

<Oh, president. The girl talked with Sai Akuto for a bit, but I found her home without much difficulty, gya.>

This girl was named Kamiyama Kanna. She was one of the three student council officers and she could transform into a wolf. She was currently using that sense of smell to tail Yoshie.

"That's nice, but we are not working for some underground business. As long as we know her identity, finding her residence is easy. What I want to know is if she did anything suspicious. What did she discuss with Sai Akuto? Was she trying to gain information on him?"

<Didn't look like it, gya. It seems this really was the first she'd heard of him, gya.>

"So their meeting was a complete coincidence?"

<Looks that way, gya.>

"Well, he does stand out. And I suppose no one would take the risk of contacting their target ahead of time. Let's assume it's another case of his terrible luck with women. I just wish that would stop causing so much trouble. Not that it matters to me if he dies. This is about my own personal revenge," muttered Lily as the look in her eyes grew harsh.

<Is just having the data enough?> asked 2V.

"It should be. No two people have the same mana waves. I can set the values for the machine remotely. Being able to handle most things without meeting face to face is only logical, right?" said Yoshie.

She was calling from her home to the laboratory to which 2V had brought Keena's blood sample. The device meant to transfer things to the virtual alternate dimension had been left in the laboratory, but Yoshie was the one adjusting its settings.

"This is similar to using magic through Keena. You could say Keena's inherent magic allows her to freely alter the virtual alternate dimension."

Joy could be heard in Yoshie's voice. 2V noticed it and asked a question.

<Do you mind if I ask why you are so fixated on altering the virtual alternate dimension?>

"If we can change the world as we see fit, I was thinking people could simply live there. They could live in comfort. Research needs to be done into how to supply nutrients or energy, but the odds of finding a way to do that automatically are pretty good."

As she spoke, Yoshie's fingers raced busily across the several mana screens displayed on her desk.

Whenever she had a small break in rewriting the program, she would pick up and take a sip of the drink on the desk. A towel to wipe away sweat and the maintenance kit for her goggles were also within arm's reach. She continued her work with the practiced movements of someone used to working on their own.

"In other words, if people have a space in which they can live according to the contents of their mind, they can live with no need for friendship. I think that might be a truly human way to live."

Yoshie was supposedly speaking to 2V, but she began speaking to herself as she continued.

"I really am grateful for this experiment. Everyone was focused on my research, but almost everyone ignored my ideas behind the research. They would call it creepy or unhealthy. If anything is possible in the virtual alternate dimension, you can live like you're in a video game. I was thinking of giving the virtual alternate dimension certain rules when it was changed. That way anyone who entered would become data in the game. They would be data that can rewrite its own data. In other words, they could use their own will to achieve more growth than a physical body is capable of. Once everyone becomes a video game character and tries it out, I'm sure they'll finally understand what I'm trying to say."

Yoshie increased her programming speed.

<How very interesting.>

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Those words were accompanied by a secret smile from 2V.

And that smile was on 2V's real body. She was watching several mana screens while lying in a room filled with no furnishings other than many dolls. 2V lived secretly in that apartment that not even her fellow Cabinet Intelligence and Magic Office members knew about.

2V thought her and Yoshie's environment may have been similar. 2V's true form was that of a preteen girl. And she lived with her great ability not recognized by any authority.

—But it is possible to realize the things in your mind here in the real world. You are called unhealthy because you do not realize that.

Those two girls thought differently in that way. And the biggest difference was in their ultimate goal.

—If we are to gain control of the virtual alternate dimension, creating a paradise would be too boring. The only way to live a full life is to rule over the real world as a formless king in a godless world.

2V was planning to betray Yoshie. The plan she had told Yoshie about was a lie.

—And the pleasure of betrayal is most stimulating when done in the real world.

2V grinned and traced her sickly thin fingers across her pale face.

Chapter 2: Let's Go to the Video Game World

"A-chan. Fantasy is great, isn't it?"

This sudden comment came from Keena.

There was no context for it. After all, it had come early in the morning in Akuto's dorm room. Keena had snuck in at some point and was scooping white rice into her mouth with a wooden spoon.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Akuto sat up in his bed and replied to her comment. He showed no confusion over the odd situation of this red-haired girl entering his room and eating rice. He was used to her doing that.

"Fantasy, A-chan. Like swords and magic," she declared while munching on the rice.

"Isn't that what we do all the time?" asked Akuto in confusion.

However, Keena held up her spoon and waved it back and forth.

"Tsk, tsk, tsk. That's not it at all, A-chan. Fantasy is about heroes who come from another world and captured princesses."

"Yeah, I suppose you won't find those in real life," said Akuto while feeling that something was off about that statement.

A voice denying what he said came from above.

"You two do not seem to realize how special you are."

Korone, an artificial human known as a L'Isle-Adam, jumped down from a shelf near the ceiling. She lived with Akuto because the government had ordered her to observe him, but she seemed to be leaving Akuto be recently.

"I suppose there is that. Anyway, have you been reading some old book again?" asked Akuto.

Keena shook her head.

"No. I found a fun video game."

—I sure am hearing about video games a lot recently. Come to think of it, I never got that girl's contact information. Maybe I'll find her if I start playing some video games.

"What kind of game is it? I'm interested, but I've never played any."

"This is the one I've been playing."

Keena displayed the game on a mana screen. It seemed to have been created by someone named Yoshihiko.

"See? It's as fun as rice," said Keena as she played it a bit.

Video games in his era used holographic video, but the story and gameplay had not changed much from long ago. The aspects humans found enjoyable did not change very much.

"I'm not quite sure what you mean when you say it's as fun as rice. Do you mean it gets more fun the more you chew on it?"

"C'mon. Rice is fun."

"…O-okay. Anyway, what kind of game is it?"

Akuto peered at the mana screen. It was an online RPG in which one had an adventure in a fantasy world, but its special feature was the ability to wage war by commanding troops. One could prepare many soldiers besides the player character and the size of that army would grow as one gained levels.

"It looks like a war game."

"Yeah, but you don't have to be a commander. You can be a kidnapped princess. Then you just have to be kidnapped and an army will come save you."

"Saying you 'just' have to be kidnapped is kind of amazing, but I guess it is a game… Hm? Does that mean a war begins because you were kidnapped?"

"Yeah."

"So that's what's fun about that."

Akuto somehow understood.

"I am amazed you came over in the morning to talk about video games," said Korone.

Keena clapped her hands as she remembered something.

"Oh, right! The thing is, the student council president said she would be leaving early this morning, so she wanted A-chan to go and do her job."

"Doesn't she have the three officers for that?"

"They'll be going, too. In fact, she was borrowing Hiroshi-kun too. It seems they were called in last night."

"If that's the case, I have no choice. I wonder what happened."

Akuto stood up and prepared to ask her to leave so he could change, but he suddenly realized something.

"But why were you the one to come tell me that?"

"I was up all night playing games. I happened across the president when she was about to leave."

"…I see. Don't you need to get some sleep?"

"I'm fine. As long as I eat rice, I can go for a while without sleep. And if I get tired, I can just skip class."

"You live as a free a life as always."

Akuto had Keena leave and removed his pajama top.

And then someone spoke from behind him.

"I did not think you would try to sexually seduce me like this."

"Wah!"

He turned around to find Korone standing directly behind him.

"C-come to think of it, I forgot to ask you to leave."

"You find it natural for us to be together. You could say we have the same relationship as a husband and wife."

"Don't be ridiculous… Anyway, you always leave on your own when I change."

"Yes, but something caught my attention about what you were discussing."

It was rare for Korone to say something like this. She usually did not interfere outside of teasing him. Akuto's expression grew serious.

"Something caught your attention?"

"Yes. I am in a bit of a dilemma given my official position, so I will put it bluntly: you are being targeted by a certain plan. However, I have been forbidden to reveal the contents of or stop that plan."

"That…sounds bad."

Akuto understood the gravity of the situation. Korone was a L'Isle-Adam and she acted on the orders of the government. Inside the government were a radical group that wished to eliminate Akuto as quickly as possible and a moderate group that generally wished to protect him. She had to receive conflicting orders on a lot of the details.

"Yes. So please be careful. I will do everything I can."

"Thanks. This must be what the president is dealing with."

Akuto almost removed his pajama pants, but realized Korone was staring at him.

"I almost took my pants off without thinking. Could you leave for a moment?"

"No. I cannot leave your side for an instant," said Korone with a serious expression.

But Akuto had known her long enough to understand this was a joke.

"Could you please stop with those jokes?"

Meanwhile, Lily hid on the road near Imperial University's scientific research building. She held anpan and milk while she staked out the place like a police detective. She was observing the room Michie had located the day before.

The light was on in that room. In the dimness of early morning, only that window had light coming from it.

"I want to begin my attack while no one else is here," muttered Lily.

"Eh? You've gotten permission, right? You can't just go in and attack the place…"

This question came from Hiroshi who had been dragged along against his will. He stood next to Lily while nibbling at a breakfast of a cream-filled bread, but his eyes opened in surprise.

"If I had permission, I wouldn't be hiding and staking out the place. I'd have charged in right away. The three officers are investigating the surrounding area. Once they've confirmed the situation, I'm going in."

"G-going in?"

"I'll force our way in and beat the crap out of whoever's inside. What else would I mean?"

Hiroshi could not help but panic.

"Wait! Then why did you bring me along!?"

"Oh. I guess I never mentioned that." Lily nodded with a look of realization. "I've learned that Yamato Bouichirou's subordinates are putting together a certain plan."

"Eh? Yamato Bouichirou's…?"

Hiroshi was at a loss for words.

It had gone through various twists and turns, but Yamato Bouichirou had been the one to give Hiroshi the anti-demon king combat suit he had used.

"That's why I called you. You may not be much help in a fight, but you might know something or they might be in a special position as far as they are concerned."

"Eh? But I don't know anything about this."

"I know that. I just mean you might remember something given the chance. And if you happen to be an important existence to them, I can use you as a hostage."

Hiroshi paled because Lily's voice did not contain even a hint of joking.

"W-wait. You're…joking, right?"

"Of course not. I'm willing to make a few sacrifices if I can kill 2V."

Lily's eyes had completely glazed over in anger.

"W-wait. Isn't this just a personal grudge? …A-anyway, what is this plan? Didn't you come here to stop it?"

"What's wrong with a personal grudge? And I'm not thinking about stopping that plan."

"Eh?"

"The plan is to seal Sai Akuto in the virtual alternate dimension. Most likely, he will either be left there with no influence on the outside world or they will kill him inside."

"A-and you aren't going to stop them?"

"Why should I care? That's his personal problem. As long as the majority of the students are safe, it's not my problem."

As Lily made that announcement, she received a telepathic communication. It came from the three officers.

<President, I have control of the back, arinsu. No one can get out now.>

"Good. I'll tell you when I'm going to go in," replied Lily as she tossed aside her anpan and milk.

She grabbed Hiroshi's hand and started walking.

"W-wait, president. I'm not ready…"

"I'm not waiting around. If we don't go now, people will start to arrive."

Lily pulled on Hiroshi's hand and entered the grounds.

Imperial University was opened to the public. Outsiders often visited the individual laboratories. For that reason, Lily easily arrived at the door to their destination.

At the very least, there had been no resistance or traps so far. Lily was still cautious and she glanced at Hiroshi as she reached for the doorknob.

Hiroshi assumed she wanted something from him, but he was shocked when she kicked down the door without waiting for a response.

"Wh-what are you doing, president!?"

But Lily did not respond. After kicking down the door, she immediately entered the room. She did not enter the way one normally entered a university laboratory. She looked like special forces entering a terrorist hideout or a yakuza attacking a rival group.

Lily rolled inside while keeping her stance low. She held her arms forward while glancing around the room. She specialized in a spell that freely extended her arms, so she could fire her fists like handgun bullets. If she caught sight of someone, she would blow them away in the next instant. But that was only if she had a target.

"What!?"

Lily's expression stiffened at this unexpected turn of events.

Despite the lights being on, no one was inside.

There was nowhere to hide in the room. Shelves of documents and experimental equipment cluttered up the laboratory, but the space felt cramped even with one person standing inside.

"Did he get away? It couldn't be."

Lily telepathically checked with the three officers. They replied with puzzled voices.

<What? Nothing has happened, arinsu.>

<Uga.>

<Kita Yoshie hasn't done anything either, gya.>

"Check closer! They might be tricking you!"

The instant Lily barked that order, a single ray of light glittered on a desk in the laboratory.

Lily took a defensive stance, but it was the light of a mana screen. It showed a man with a forgettable face. In other words, it was 2V.

"Damn you!" roared Lily, but it seemed the footage was not a transmission.

A preset message began to play.

<Oh, well done, well done, little girl. Unfortunately, I was aware of a great many things, so I took the initiative. We have already begun, so you were a

bit late. I look forward to the next time we meet. Oh, but I guess there won't be a next time. Did you know there is a way to rig a room to be automatically annihilated?>

Before 2V finished speaking, Lily leaped backwards. She reached out and grabbed ahold of Hiroshi who was standing still in surprise and she rolled out of the room.

<I thought it would be fun to try it, but it would have caused too much trouble. Thanks for all your hard work.>

2V's mocking voice reverberated throughout the room.

"G-goddamn you!" shouted Lily as she began lightly beating Hiroshi on the head as she held him in her arms.

"Eeee! Stop! President! Please calm down!"

"Are you sure this method is okay? Isn't it a bit odd?" asked Yoshie.

"Don't worry. Everything is going well," replied 2V.

Yoshie and 2V had immediately begun implementing their plan once the preparations were complete. The device to control the virtual alternate dimension had been programmed and they had magically transferred themselves close to the school.

Yoshie's ability to complete the programming faster than Lily had expected and 2V's usage of a magical transfer to escape had won out in the end. Magical transfers cost quite a lot, so they were not used unless one had a very good reason.

"They misjudged how seriously we were taking this. Even if we are sneaking around, this is still a government project."

"I suppose I should be grateful I can have my research backed by something like that. Anyway, why did we have to come to the school? Isn't this an experiment to control the virtual alternate dimension?"

"Ha ha. Come to think of it, I never explained that part to you."

2V laughed and pointed across Constant Magic Academy's schoolyard. The morning assembly was being held there. Yoshie and 2V stood where 2V's tent had been located during the large-scale battle recently held here.

"We will seal him inside."

2V pointed at the boy standing atop the podium rather than on the grass. When Yoshie saw him, her eyes widened in surprise.

"Him? But I just spoke with him recently."

"You spoke with him? Do you not know who he is? He is the demon king," said 2V carelessly.

"Fwohhh! That's a surprise. I didn't know that. Hm? We're going to seal him inside?"

Yoshie's eyebrows moved up.

"Yes. If he is sealed within the virtual alternate dimension, he will have the same level of power as a normal human. A lot of people want to kill him without causing any damage to those around him."

2V grinned.

"K-kill him?"

Yoshie was clearly confused, so 2V suppressed laughter and continued speaking.

"Exactly. That is the government's project. I apologize for deceiving you, but you do not need to worry about this. You will not be considered a criminal for doing this. And taking part in a killing is something everyone should try at least once."

Yoshie was so shocked she covered her face with her hands.

"I-I don't understand how you can think like that. Hey, can't you rethink this?"

"No. I'm not trying to threaten you, but you'll be wanted by the knights if you don't do this. Ha ha ha. What is there to think about? Not doing it is a crime and doing it isn't. You don't have a choice in the matter."

2V could not help but laugh.

Yoshie bit her lip.

—What can I do? Wait, there might still be something I can do. I might be able to turn everything around. I need to stay calm. Stay calm…

"O-okay. I don't like it, but I have no choice. I just have to set up this device, right?"

"Exactly. Thank you for your cooperation."

2V gave a triumphant laugh.

"I have to seal him as a normal human. Those are my orders, right?"

"Yes. Don't even think about doing something else instead."

"There's nothing I could do. I have no choice. I understand that."

Yoshie leaned over the virtual alternate dimension control device.

The device was a cube with 50 cm sides and it had a keyboard and monitor embedded on one side. Yoshie used them to operate it.

"What does it feel like to help kill someone you talked to, even if just once?" asked 2V cruelly.

Yoshie could not help let the disgust appear on her face, but she responded calmly.

"It's painful because there were things I could sympathize with him about. I just hope he will understand to a certain extent."

"Hmm. I see. I don't know what it is you want him to understand, though. Is it something you need him to think? Well, it doesn't matter. It's best to put your all into your work even if you have to ignore your feelings."

"I agree with that. But in the end, people are made to only do what they want to do. I only spoke with him for a bit, but I get the feeling we have an understanding of each other. And so I somehow understand what he wants to do. In other words, I get the feeling he will be able to overcome this as long as he is given a chance."

"A chance? What are you talking about?"

"Heh heh. This is what I'm talking about."

After her extremely calm yet passionate announcement, Yoshie activated the device without waiting for 2V's instruction.

"Wh-what did you do!?"

For once, 2V panicked. Even a strategist on 2V's level could not tell what she was thinking.

"What did I do? I activated the device. This will transfer the surrounding people and objects into the virtual alternate dimension. Just to be clear, I made sure to do everything you told me to do," said Yoshie.

A low rumbling could be heard as the virtual alternate dimension control device activated.

"The surrounding people and objects!?"

Surprised by those unexpected words, 2V stretched out a hand to grab Yoshie.

"It's too late," muttered Yoshie.

2V was unable to grab ahold of Yoshie. 2V's vision was already distorting. Space itself was glowing and sinking downwards.

"This academy, I, and the control device itself are being transferred to the virtual alternate dimension expanded around the god Megis."

"The device itself!? You fool! You have no idea what will happen!"

"True, the device is meant to be left outside. But if I don't bring it inside, you could use it. Also, I added in an element you hadn't thought of. To give myself an advantage on the other side, I used the video game I programmed as the world control program. This will allow him to do something. That is what I believe."

Yoshie was calm. As she held the device in her arms, she too sank "down".

"Tch! You thought of all that in just an instant!? But I will be going with you."

2V used his left hand to grab his extended right arm at the elbow. And he pulled that right arm off at the elbow. This was only possible because he was a doll.

And 2V threw that right arm toward the device. Yoshie noticed and covered the device with her hands, but that right hand grabbed tightly onto her hand.

"I will be sending just my arm there!" shouted 2V.

And the surrounding world splendidly "sank to the other side".

A bit before the device was activated, Akuto stood on the podium while trying to figure out what to say.

Today, a morning assembly was being held in front of the entire student body. With the student council president and three officers gone, Akuto had been appointed to take their place. He had no choice but to take care of the morning assembly.

At Constant Magic Academy, the headmaster almost never gave a greeting. Instead, the student council president would give advice concerning the students' lives and tell them what the student council's policies were. Akuto had to do that now.

"This week's motto is 'work to make the school more beautiful', but you must not think of this as nothing more than cleaning."

After announcing that he was acting in place of the president, Akuto gave that declaration, but he realized he should not have done so. He was not explaining the policy. Instead, he was giving his interpretation of the ideology behind it and hoping to begin a discussion from there. As he continued speaking, his argument seemed to travel in an odd direction. He began to struggle to find the right words.

"Filth collects in complicated spaces one rarely touches. It is the same as dust collecting in the spaces between tangled wires. To clean that, one must untangle the wires and unplug everything. In other words, true cleaning cannot be accomplished without breaking everything down and building it back up. Making the school a more beautiful place means to remove the mental sediment that has built up in each and every one of you. And that sediment builds up in the complicated spaces one rarely touches. The wires from before are a metaphor for this process. In other words, it is important that we all break down our mental systems that have become set in stone."

Despite being the one speaking, Akuto found himself unable to control the odd direction in which his speech was headed. The students began muttering to each other at his extreme ideas.

"Is he telling us to doubt our common sense?"

"No, he mentioned our mental systems, so he must be telling us to try going completely nuts."

"I see. A speech from the demon king really is something else."

—No. That isn't what I meant…

Akuto was troubled.

"Now what is this mental system? It is related to how humans comprehend their surroundings. To lessen the mental burden, people simplify their comprehension of things. Even attending this school is the result of this simplified comprehension. Learning and going to school are not actually identical concepts. That is what I mean by a system. You must not forget that those comprehensions that you have set in stone are connected to the system of society."

An even greater stir ran through the students.

"He isn't telling us to go nuts. He's telling us to actively destroy the system of society!"

"This is anarchism! And at the morning assembly!"

"And from a substitute speaker!"

—Huh?

Akuto thought deeply about what he should say next.

"No. I am merely saying this beautification process should be turned towards our set ideas as well. Those will eventually leave us inert. If we are aware we carry society on our shoulders, we must actively keep up the difficult fight for a new era."

"Wow. He's turning the morning assembly into a political rally!"

"A fight for a new era? That sounds like something an agitator would say!"

"I was keeping quiet because you were a substitute! But I won't let you have your way!"

It did not look like the commotion among the students was going to die down. Angry shouts washed over Akuto.

—Not good. I need to calm them down…

"Silence! No matter how much of a commotion you cause, it will not affect the legitimacy of my words! I have said nothing to be ashamed of! No matter who speaks the words, you should listen to them as an explanation of their path! And if you will not listen, it means this academy has left the proper path! If that is the case, you will soon come to regret…it…"

By the time Akuto realized how arrogantly he was speaking, he was almost finished. His tone gradually fell toward the end, but the students did not notice that timidity. This was because the entire academy began "sinking" partway through.

"Wha-…!?"

"Kyaaah! What is this!?"

"Is it the demon king's power!?"

"E-eeee! Are we descending into hell?"

Screams filled the schoolyard. However, the entire academy – screams included – continued to sink into space itself.

—This sensation!

Akuto recognized it. This was the same sensation from when he had entered a book.

—So does that mean…

Akuto suspected Keena for an instant, but when he spotted her among the students, she was standing next to Korone and looking shocked.

—Wh-what? Then what is happening here!?

Junko was also able to recognize what was happening.

"This is the inside of the virtual alternate dimension, isn't it?" asked Junko when she found Etou Fujiko.

"Yes, I am sure of it. Even if I did not enter into that one before."

Fujiko soothed the female students who approached her. She had a much more demonic personality than Akuto and practiced black magic, but the students had yet to discover who she truly was. The female students even referred to her as "onee-sama".

When the crying girls heard what Fujiko had said, they looked up at her.

"Onee-sama, you know what this is?"

"Yes. This is most likely the virtual alternate dimension used for magical transfers. I witnessed a similar phenomenon once."

Fujiko glanced around.

Constant Magic Academy was within a forest. Its grounds had always contained a large expanse of nature, but the forest was much thicker now. It felt as if a jungle was approaching. And the scenery was blatantly different from usual. The flora was obviously not the type seen in the island nation making up the empire.

"It seems the entire academy was transferred over."

Fujiko looked toward Junko and Junko nodded.

"But senpai, the school building…"

Junko pointed toward the school building.

It was definitely the school building, but its appearance had somehow changed. One of the students in the schoolyard realized what the difference was.

"A fortress… It's a fortress! This is what it looked like back when it was a fortress!"

The school building had almost no windows. The few it did have were high up and the narrow type used as an arrowslit. The smooth walls prevented entry and the main entrance was shut with a thick gate.

"I had heard the school building was a fortress during the first demon king war," said Junko and a stir ran through the surrounding students.

"Then have we gone back in time?"

Junko denied that possibility.

"No. If so, the fortress would not be abandoned. We have not travelled to a different era. Instead, we should assume this world has been modified by certain rules. That is how the virtual alternate dimension works."

"This world has been modified by certain rules?" asked a female student.

Fujiko nodded.

"Yes. In other words, we can assume this is the world within a story or within a video game!" she said based on her past experience.

A sudden voice then responded to her.

"Exactly. I shall explain the rest. Also, I must apologize."

It was a clear male voice.

Fujiko and the others all turned in that direction.

They saw a boy who seemed to have come from the jungle. He had a slim but noble appearance.

He had long hair and wore old-fashioned armor.

"My name is Yoshihiko. Please listen to what I have to say."

Yoshie was not surprised by the change to her appearance.

She had modified the virtual alternate dimension so that change would occur.

—I'm glad I loaded the game data just in case.

To escape 2V, she had used a game of her own design as the rules for the virtual alternate dimension. It was the imaginative fantasy war game based on the first demon king war that Keena had played.

—Now, then. The rules of the game are gradually coming back to me, so I need to figure out what to do.

Yoshie thought calmly about how to oppose 2V's plan.

She had fled into the virtual alternate dimension in order to protect Akuto. And she had the control device. It could not be interfered with from outside. 2V's arm had made it inside, but she had yet to find it. However, she doubted it could influence anything.

—If the game's program is altered from the outside, this could be bad. But any fundamental changes would effectively make the student's hostages, so it should be impossible.

She doubted even 2V would do anything which would cause an indiscriminate slaughter. The one thing known for sure about him was that he worked for the government.

—That means my goal is to contact the demon king. And if I can eliminate 2V before that, I'll do that. That sums it up well enough.

After gathering her thoughts, Yoshie decided to appear before the students. Given what would happen afterwards, she could not tell them the truth of the plan, but she had to take responsibility for getting them involved.

—But this should be perfectly safe. After all, the rules of the game control this world. And I designed the game, so I understand this world better than anyone.

"Yes. In other words, we can assume this is the world within a story or within a video game!"

As soon as she exited the jungle and walked onto the schoolyard, she heard a beautiful voice.

—Fwohhh! Someone already understands the situation? I had heard this was an excellent school, but that's amazing.

Yoshie was impressed and she took a step forward.

And then she realized she had yet to decide how to speak as a guy.

—Oh, crap. I never did a voice chat or anything. How should I speak to sound masculine? Um…Oh, I know. I just have to speak like the guys in otome games.

Otome games were games girls played to enjoy virtual romances with beautiful boys. Naturally, only extremely beautiful boys appeared in them. Yoshie had limited samples to draw from when it came to boys, so she had no other choice here.

"Exactly. I shall explain the rest. Also, I must apologize."

Yoshie was surprised to hear her voice had become male as well, but she was satisfied because it sounded exactly like a character from an otome game.

"My name is Yoshihiko. Please listen to what I have to say," said Yoshie.

"You will explain? You must apologize?"

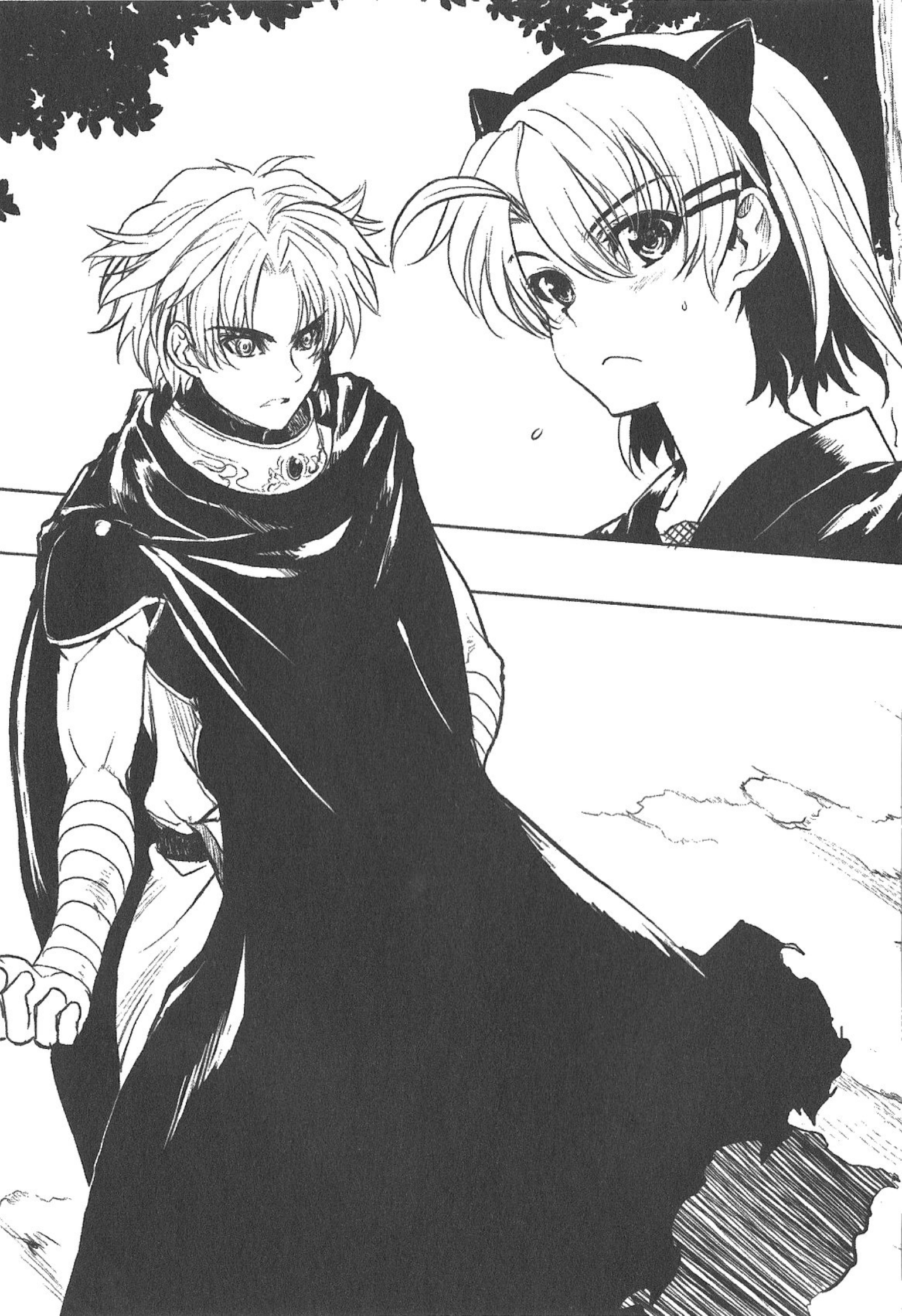
The students all began asking questions at once. Countless gazes poured onto Yoshie. She was not very good at speaking directly with people, but she decided she could manage while using a different face.

"This is an experiment in controlling the virtual alternate dimension. It was originally meant to be a small-scale experiment, but all of you were caught up in it by mistake."

That comment brought on cries of anger and fear.

Yoshie's face clouded over with fear.

"Wait. Please calm down and listen."



A voice cut in to rein in the students. The voice belonged to a girl with short hair and a dignified aura.

"I am Hattori Junko. Please continue."

The girl naming herself Junko nodded toward Yoshie. Yoshie smiled back.

"Thank you."

But Junko averted her gaze. Yoshie was disappointed her thanks had been denied, but she had to continue speaking.

"That is what I must apologize for. But please do not worry. The experiment was in creating a virtual reality game. As long as you heed the warnings I give you, you are in no danger."

"Warnings?"

"In other words, I will tell you the rules of the game. First, you might truly die if you do not return to the real world within a week of in-game time."

"Eh? Then how can you say we aren't in any danger!?"

"M-my apologies. I am only saying this for your safety. One week is the longest anyone has been able to remain within the virtual alternate dimension. It is being controlled this time, so you will likely be safe even if you stay longer than that. However, no food is being brought in from outside. One week in-game is equivalent to a dozen or so hours in reality. Your physical bodies will not starve or die of thirst in that time."

"…I see."

"Second, even if you die in this world, you will simply return to the real world. In other words, you can return by dying."

"Eh?"

Everyone was surprised to hear that.

"I'm not sure I can believe that."

Everyone began giving similar comments and tilting their heads.

—It is true that would be hard to believe. Um…what should I do? I know!

"Are there any animals around here? Were there any being raised in the academy?" asked Yoshie.

One of the students pointed toward the edge of the school building. A chicken coop had existed there, but it was gone now. However, a chicken was wandering around.

"Huh? The coop is gone, but the chicken is still here."

"Please watch that chicken."

Yoshie drew a dagger kept in her armor and threw it toward the chicken. The sharp tip sliced the chicken's neck apart.

"How could you!?"

Some of the female students screamed and covered their eyes, but the ones closely watching the chicken let out gasps of surprise.

The severed chicken head and the body that continued running for a few steps both blurred and then disappeared. It was reminiscent of watching a video disappear.

"Eh?"

Voices of surprise rose from the students.

Yoshie grinned inwardly.

—Fwohhh! That's a game for you. I'd never hit throwing a dagger in real life, but it was dead on. I was too panicked to notice it before, but being in a video game is even better than I had imagined. Wait, I have to continue my explanation.

"Now, the animals created within here are different."

Yoshie picked up the dagger that had soaked in the chicken's blood but now shined spotlessly. He turned toward the jungle and spotted an animal walking out. It was a rabbit.

"Watch that rabbit."

Yoshie held up the dagger once more.

"Eh? But it's so cute. Can't we just catch it?"

A girl near the rabbit walked toward it.

The rabbit's red eyes rolled around in its head and its ears stood up. Its cute behavior drew the girl even closer.

"Watch out!" shouted Yoshie.

"Eh?"

The girl was confused.

And the rabbit jumped.

But this was not a cute little hop. It leaped straight toward the girl with obvious intent to kill.

"Shaaaahhh!"

With that strange cry, fangs that looked like sharp knives grew from the rabbit's mouth.

"Kyaaah!"

The girl covered her face with her hands, but the rabbit shot straight toward her throat. If its fangs pierced her throat, it would rip out her carotid artery.

However, Yoshie lopped off the rabbit's head before it could reach the girl.

With two dull sounds, the rabbit's head and body fell separately to the ground. The blood oozing from the wound stained the ground. Sticky blood could be seen on the dagger sticking into the ground.

"It isn't disappearing?" muttered the girl.

"This is a murderous headhunting rabbit. I think you should understand now that this is a game. And you should understand what it means to die here. This corpse will disappear after a while, but it will remain much longer than that of a life form brought in here."

Junko spoke up as Yoshie gave her explanation.

"But telling us to die in order to return is a problem. I will not go so far as to say you are lying, but it might not work right and people will have a mental reluctance to die. Is there no better way?"

As Yoshie thought how to answer that, a beautiful girl with long hair spoke.

"I believe the condition to leave the virtual alternate dimension is to complete the planned events here."

The girl was Fujiko. Yoshie realized she was the same one who had made the perceptive realization earlier.

"Yes. Completing the game will likely allow us to leave. I will now give a simple explanation of the game's rules. Your roles here have been determined by your personalities. While here, you will fight, obtain victory, gain experience, and level up. As this is an experiment into the effectiveness of using the virtual alternate dimension, the combat and magic skills you gain here will remain with you when you return to the real world. Your brain will have learned the behavior patterns. It is the same as never forgetting how to ride a bike once you learn how."

The more perceptive students gave joyous comments when they heard that.

"That's great. So if we keep defeating things like that rabbit over the week we spend here, we'll have learned combat magic we couldn't learn at most training grounds."

—Now they should be able to enjoy this game.

Yoshie was delighted and she nodded.

"Now, please try to open a mana screen just as you do when checking the internet in reality," she instructed.

Everyone opened a mana screen in their student handbooks. It displayed various parameters and the available in-game commands.

"You can see your parameters and the commands related to the rules. These may change, so keep an eye on them as you take action. The special characteristic of this game is the ability to command armies of NPCs. The size of that army will increase as you level up, so use them to their fullest."

As Yoshie spoke, Fujiko asked a question.

"What is needed to complete the game?"

"This game is won by defeating the demon king."

The instant Yoshie said that, the schoolyard's atmosphere changed.

"Defeat?"

"The demon king?"

A stir ran through the students.

"Come to think of it, Sai Akuto isn't here."

"Soga Keena and Korone are gone, too."

The students spoke as they glanced around the area.

—That's an odd reaction. Is he hated because he's the demon king?

One's role in the game was determined based on one's personality. That meant Akuto would naturally become the demon king.

Yoshie felt the conversation heading in an odd direction, but the surrounding atmosphere then veered in an even more dangerous direction.

"Nice! So we have to defeat the demon king to escape this place! We can get back at him for everything we go through on a daily basis! And defeating the demon king is sure to give you tons of experience, right?"

"Plus there's no risk in dying. Not that I want to go out of my way to die."

That understanding spread through the students and their muttering began to change to cries of joy.

—Huh? Huh? This has gotten strange. Let's see… What should I do? I need to settle things here.

Yoshie began to panic. She was also worried by 2V's presence. He was an uncertain factor and she had no idea what he would do.

—But I have this armor as a last resort. Although it's only any good as a reset switch. I need to gather the students and bring them all back to the real world.

Yoshie stroked a hand along the armor she wore. That armor was the current appearance of the virtual alternate dimension control device.

"It seems a human will has altered this world," said Korone as she stared at a mana screen.

"That happened before, right? We managed to alter the contents of a book to a certain extent," said Akuto with a nod.

"We have been given the roles that suit us best in this game world and can leave once the game has been completed. It is the same as before."

Korone had been the first to realize a mana screen could be opened. She had read through the manual and grasped most of what Yoshie had explained.

"The roles that suit us best?" complained Akuto.

Akuto, Korone, and Keena were in the main hall of a huge castle. The inside was dimly lit, a luxurious gold throne sat in the center of the back wall, and a red carpet stretched out before it.

Sitting in that throne was Akuto who wore gauntlets with claws, spiked shoulder armor, and other overly ornamental armor. In other words, he was dressed in the perfect final boss style.

"A-chan, you look so cool."

Keena was enjoying herself. She wore a robe and appeared to be a priest.

"I wish I had been a princess, but I guess it would've have been weird for the demon king to come rescue the captured princess."

Keena opened a mana screen and checked her parameters.

Class: Priest

Level: 10

HP: 20

Strength: 6

Magic: 18

Army: 10000

"Army?"

"This game lets you command an army, right?"

Keena snapped her fingers. A line of warrior priests who wore white cloaks over their armor appeared in the hall.

"I see. So you play at war."

Akuto nodded in understanding. At the same moment, he had an unpleasant thought.

"That means everyone will be coming to defeat me, doesn't it?"

"Yes. By the way, don't you usually start at Level 1? Are we being given special treatment because we are the enemies?"

"Come to think of it, you might be right."

Korone's comment led Akuto to open a mana screen of his own.

Class: Demon King

Level: 99

HP: 9999

Strength: 25

Magic: 25

Army: 200000

"They're all at the max values."

"It seems the human limits for strength and magic are set at 18."

Keena and Korone both commented on Akuto's parameters.

It was a complicated feeling for Akuto.

"If I'm this strong, everyone will attack me at once, won't they? But if I let them defeat me, the game will end, right? Maybe that's for the best."

"Ehhh? You can't do that. You have to enjoy the game," complained Keena.

However, Akuto had no obligation to listen to her.

"No. Everyone might be in danger if a week passes. It would be best if I lost as soon as possible. In fact, maybe I should kill myself right here…"

"Wait a second."

Korone stopped Akuto with a serious tone of voice. Her tone of voice was always serious, but it had a sense of urgency now.

"What is it?"

"I have looked over the data as much as I can from inside, but there seem to be some dangerous elements."

"Dangerous?"

"Yes. It seems three elements are influencing this world. I predict their interference will lead to effects not in the original program."

"Three elements?"

"The first is Soga Keena. In other words, you."

Korone pointed at Keena and Keena looked confused.

"Me?"

"It seems this interference with the virtual alternate dimension is possible by using your mana vibrations. In other words, you can change the rules with your will."

"Change the rules? I won't do that. After all, this is the game I know," said Keena with a smile.

However, Akuto understood what Korone meant.

"I see. It was Keena's power that brought us into that book, too. Was it because Keena knew the rules this world is based on that we entered so easily this time?"

"Most likely."

"But I don't see how that's dangerous. We can leave after Keena enjoys the game a bit."

"Allow me to continue. The second element is that the virtual alternate dimension control device was brought into this world."

"Wouldn't that kind of thing normally be left outside?"

"Yes. There must have been some kind of mistake. This means the control device can interfere with itself. Depending on what happens, it is possible we could fall into an irrecoverable situation that cannot be controlled."

"That sounds serious…but you said there's another dangerous element?"

Akuto gulped. It seemed they could not simply enjoy the game.

"The third is an existence inside the virtual alternate dimension that does not obey the rules."

"Eh? How could that be? Wasn't everything here created around those rules?"

"I do not know the cause, but my analysis of all the data shows there is someone not following those rules."

"Understood. Let's assume this person is here. How is it a problem?"

"I cannot predict what small problems it will cause, but I can predict one major problem it will cause. If someone is harmed by this existence not following the rules, they will be truly damaged rather than simply taking damage in the game."

"That…really is dangerous."

Akuto realized the gravity of the situation.

If this person ignoring the rules attacked and killed a student, that student would not return to the real world. They would truly die.

"Where is this person who can ignore the rules?"

"I do not know and it is likely impossible to know. I do not even know if they have malicious intentions. The odds are high that the accident you fear will not occur. However, if they do mean harm, the students will be killed while believing it is only a game."

"Understood. Either way, we don't have time to enjoy this. We need to exit this world immediately."

Akuto began to stand up from his throne, but Korone stopped him.

"You cannot do that. The game's rules do not allow the demon king to commit suicide. In other words, even if you disappeared, the program would produce an NPC to take your place. You would escape, but the other students would still be in danger."

"Oh, I see."

"Nevertheless, finishing the game quickly would be safest."

"Then isn't there almost nothing I can do? I just have to be killed without putting up much of a fight."

"No, there is a simpler way."

"A simpler way? How could there be?"

Akuto shook his head, but Korone replied with a serious expression.

"We slaughter them all."

"What?"

"We achieve absolute victory by slaughtering them all. The demon king sends out his army to kill all of the attacking adventurers and achieve game over."

"W-wait. But that…"

Akuto could not help but hesitate.

"What are you afraid of? The more time passes, the more the uncertain factors will grow. Also, our opponent's levels will rise. Providing them a swift death would be the safest for everyone involved," said Korone plainly.

She was right. Akuto could see no holes in her argument.

"But…"

"No buts. We will hunt down the adventurers while they are still inexperienced. Let us make it rain blood. Or perhaps it would be more efficient to capture them, gather them in one spot, and bury them alive. At any rate, it is crucial that we kill them efficiently. That is the final solution."

Korone moved her face toward Akuto. The look in her eyes was serious. The look in her eyes was always serious, but it looked even more serious than usual.

"…Do you want to kill them by any chance? Do you see this as a game?"

"Of course not. Oh, driving them all to a cliff and sending a stampede of cattle to send them off the cliff would be both efficient and quite a spectacle."

As she spoke, Korone kneeled before Akuto.

"Give me the order and I, Demon General Korone, shall make a bloodbath out of the rebels."

"…You're really enjoying this, aren't you?"

Akuto was conflicted, but Korone's idea was the safest if he ignored her cruel jokes.

"Understood. I'll leave it to you."

"Thank you very much. I ensure you I will bring victory to the demon king. All hail the magnificent demon king! Glory to evil!"

Korone thrust a hand into the air and Keena delightedly joined in.

"Glory to evil!"

"Glory to evil!"

And then more voices joined in. At some point, the large hall had become filled with soldiers in black armor and ugly demonic beasts. They raised a storm of growls, stomped their feet enough to shake the earth below them, and swung their arms up into the air as well.

"Glory to evil! Glory to evil! Glory to evil! Glory to evil!"

—Even if this is a game…this has gotten out of hand…

Akuto silently complained.

Chapter 3: The Demon King and the Whereabouts of the Holy Grail

"Luckily, I can communicate inside if the communication unit itself is on the other side. I was right to send just my arm inside."

2V had transformed into a snake. Or more accurately, the severed arm of 2V's doll had become a snake.

The arm had a communication unit installed, so it could act on its own. It was installed with all the equipment needed to act as a hidden camera and gather information.

The snake hid in the jungle and watched Yoshie and the students. The plain green snake blended into that world quite well.

"It seems that girl managed to escape into this world well enough, but there is something I did not tell her. If my information is accurate, someone was lurking within this virtual alternate dimension long before we arrived. Now, what effect will that have on this world? I need to reach this person before anyone else does," muttered 2V.

Someone had been lurking in that world from the beginning. That had to be related to the uncertain element.

"I need to do more research into this. Fortunately, the priests of Megis do not seem to have noticed yet."

While muttering to herself, 2V transferred her consciousness to a doll in the real world. This was the man with the forgettable face that 2V often used. The doll was currently inside the temple of Megis's data room. The room contained nothing but a few specialized terminals, but those terminals provided access to a large number of files.

2V searched for the file her researcher colleague had once seen. It contained information on the original demon king.

It took some time, but 2V found a few files on the subject. And they told her something astonishing.

"This is it! It's just as I thought… No, it's even better!"

"I feel I am in no position to ask you to do what I say, but I would like to give you some advice so as to avoid any possible danger."

Yoshie (as Yoshihiko) addressed the crowd.

Whether the students gathered in the schoolyard were listening or not, a great stir was running through them. Half of them seemed uneasy and the other half seemed prepared to let loose and enjoy the game. Either way, they were restless.

—This is a problem. I need to ensure they all return safely to reality and I need to find 2V and Sai Akuto.

Yoshie opened a screen and checked on the current situation.

She was using her special rights as the programmer of that world to check the program directly.

Just as Korone had, Yoshie learned there was someone within the virtual alternate dimension who was not obeying the rules of the game.

—2V? No, he was drawn in just like me, so that couldn't be it. And it's just his arm, so he shouldn't be able to do much. In that case, could there have been someone in here from the beginning? At any rate, this is dangerous. If the others come into contact with this person, they could be killed!

Yoshie panicked, but she still did not think she could say anything that would convince the students.

"This isn't good. Can I really get up on the podium and give them orders?" muttered Yoshie.

If it was necessary, she would have to do it, but it would require the strength of commanding an army. She honestly felt it would be difficult for someone like her.

"Knowledge-wise, I do not think anyone but you can do it," whispered Junko who had apparently heard what Yoshie had said.

—Eh?

Yoshie looked over in surprise. Junko was smiling in order to cheer her up.

"B-but I am an outsider and I have never held authority over anyone before. Will they really listen to me?"

"If you are worried about that, I can speak for you. And even if you do not want that, I must insist that I help in whatever way I can," said Junko.

—She must be a nice person to be helping me here. This is a huge help in a trying time like this.

Yoshie relaxed and managed to smile.

—Let's see. I need to thank her. I'm a guy right now, so I need to smile like an otome game character.

"I am truly grateful that you would say that. It seems my worries were unnecessary."

—Will that make me sound cool?

But despite Yoshie's thoughts, Junko turned away when she saw Yoshie's smile.

"I did not mean it like that. I am saying I do not trust you."

—Hm, looks like it didn't work. Well, this is no time to be getting down over that.

"Then please speak for me. That is just one less thing I must worry about."

"Okay… As long as you understand," mumbled Junko.

Yoshie stepped up onto the podium.

"Everyone, please listen. I would like to apologize again as the one who created this situation. I would also like to ask for your cooperation. I ask your permission to stand atop the podium like this. But I am not asking you to obey my orders. You may not trust me, but I only want to say one thing: if you act carefully here, you can return safely to the real world while enjoying yourselves."

Focus gathered on Yoshie. Everyone seemed willing to listen to her for the moment.

"Thank you for listening. I already gave you an overview of the situation. If you refuse to believe what I said, that is fine. I merely ask for your cooperation in leaving this place. I believe we need someone to take command and I believe she would be suitable."

Yoshie pointed toward Junko.

"Ohhh!" said the students.

Several of them voiced their approval.

"Having Hattori-san as our leader should be fine."

"I hear she played a major role in the demon king war."

"You hear a lot about her relationship with the demon king, but she did fight in that war."

Junko's mouth opened in a surprised O, but she stepped up onto the podium when Yoshie reached a hand out to her. However, she refused to hold Yoshie's hand.

"I believe we should act on our own a bit longer before deciding whether we should trust him. Until then, let us work together and act carefully as we fight in our quest for power and experience!"

The crowd let out an excited cry in response to Junko's words.

Yoshie was quite impressed.

—She's really cool. I wish I could do things like that.

Overcome with admiration, Yoshie whispered to Junko without thinking.

"They really trust you."

"R-really? I would not say so," mumbled Junko as she blushed.

—She's being modest.

Yoshie placed her left hand on Junko's shoulder and raised her own right hand. In the space beyond that hand, a large map appeared. It showed the continent of that world.

"This is what this land looks like. Let us explore it under her command. Once you gather experience, you will gain an army of your own and be able to explore without doing anything yourself. Let us enjoy this peacefully, gain experience which can be used even in the real world, and then return! But not even I know exactly what will happen. It would be safest to gather in a single group and-…"

Yoshie suddenly trailed off.

She had heard a tremendous noise similar to an earthquake.

It came from the jungle, so everyone in the schoolyard turned in that direction.

A cloud of dust rose up from the jungle and it gradually drew closer.

"Wh-what is this?" asked Junko.

But Yoshie was just as confused by the dust.

"D-do not tell me you do not know what this is."

Junko's eyes opened wide in surprise.

—I-I need to put everyone at ease. This is probably an army and only the demon king's side could have one already.

"N-no. I was merely surprised because this is too soon."

"Too soon?"

"Only the demon king's side could command an army of that size right now. However, it would take extraordinary judgment to take action so quickly. We still have not grasped the rules!" said Yoshie in shock.

But she did not know what to say beyond that. As she stood frozen in place, Junko raised her voice.

"Everyone, prepare for battle! This is the demon king's army!"

That voice brought Yoshie back to her senses.

—I know this is a game, but when I'm experiencing it with my actual senses, I can't do anything.

But Yoshie realized this was no time to be feeling down. She checked on the students' situation once more.

There were five hundred students in all.

They were students of Constant Magic Academy, so their combat ability would be top notch. They would not give in mentally either. However, when they tried to obey Junko's order by using the weapons or magic they specialized in, they learned once more that this was not the real world.

"H-huh? My special baton…?"

"I have a knife, but I can't fill it with mana!"

"I can't use my reinforcing magic!"

The students stood still and almost completely defenseless. All five hundred of them were bunched together.

"Th-this makes them an excellent target!"

Junko frantically turned to Yoshie.

Yoshie was desperately trying to gather her thoughts.

If the demon king was attacking, there was a possibility Akuto would come himself. He had seemed intelligent, so he would be trying to free the students as quickly as possible. In that case, it would be possible to speak with him. And if all the students were killed here, that might very well solve the problem. However, Yoshie was bothered by the existence of an uncertain element. Until she knew how that would affect things, she wanted to avoid having the students die.

After gathering her thoughts, Yoshie raised her voice once more.

"Into the school building! I will handle the army!" she shouted.

Junko looked over and nodded.

"I will go, too."

Junko jumped down from the podium, passed through the rows of confused students, and began running toward the edge of the schoolyard.

"Me too!"

As Yoshie followed after her, students armed with knives and other weapons began following as well.

The cloud of dust in the jungle approached them like a giant moving wall. The earthquake-like noise roared loud enough to rob them of their hearing.

Some of the five hundred students fled and some followed Yoshie. And before their eyes, the jungle split open.

A giant rhinoceros appeared, crushing the trees of the jungle underfoot. It looked five meters tall. Rhinoceroses were not usually violent beasts, but this one had a ferocious light in its red eyes and it charged forward with the speed of a horse.

"Mwa ha ha ha ha! The demon king's army has taken the first strike! I am Demon General Korone! I have come to slaughter you all on the demon king's orders!"

Standing imposingly atop the rhinoceros's saddle was a lovely girl wearing a magician's outfit. This girl declaring her intent to slaughter them yet showing no change of expression was of course Korone.

This stopped Yoshie and the students' charge.

"Wah!"

"Wh-what is that!?"

"This is bad…"

"What kind of game is this!? It's impossible!"

The students began screaming.

Yoshie and Junko were forced to stop as well.

"Wh-who is she?"

"That is Korone, a L'Isle-Adam observer. She observes our famous student, Sai Akuto," quickly answered Junko.

"Do you know her?"

"Yes."

"That is good to hear. We might be able to talk this out."

"I am not sure she will listen. She was put on the enemy's side in here, right? Korone is the type to get carried away at times like this," said Junko while unsure what to do.

And that was precisely what happened.

"I am not here to talk! I already told you this is a slaughter!"

Korone's voice was emotionless, but that alone made it all the more frightening.

As Korone rode the rhinoceros (technically it was a game monster known as a Behemoth), she held out her staff and a green beam of light shot out. That beam cut between the swiftly fleeing students. An instant later, a tremendous explosion occurred along the path the beam had travelled. Several of the students were blown into the air.

"Gyaaah!"

"Eeeee!"

Two of them turned to dust and vanished in midair. They had died in the game.

"It's still going according to the system."

Yoshie was relieved.

And she shouted toward Korone.

"Wait! An uncertain element has slipped into this game!"

Korone replied more obediently than Yoshie had expected. The Behemoth stopped in front of them and she looked down at Yoshie and Junko.

"I am aware. That is why I am slaughtering the students to send them back to the real world as quickly as possible. I have examined the data myself. From that speech earlier, I take it you are this game's creator."

"I am. So you knew that there is someone not obeying the game's rules?"

Yoshie was even more relieved.

"Yes. But humans are inconvenient creatures. They could easily return to the real world if they let me kill them, but they insist on resisting."

"I think being afraid of that is normal," muttered Junko.

Korone nodded in response.

"But that fear can be useful. I can efficiently kill them as they flee."

After crossing her arms and making that bold announcement, Korone swung the staff in her hand. Monsters under her control such as goblins and orcs charged out from the path created by the Behemoth. These five thousand NPC troops were half of the ten thousand Korone could command. As if ink had been spilled on a piece of drawing paper, they dyed one end of the schoolyard black as they surged out.

They ran by Yoshie and Junko who had remained and they began stabbing the fleeing students in the back.

"Waaaaah!"

"Nooooo!"

Student after student screamed and turned to dust.

"Kill the men! Rape the women!" shouted Korone expressionlessly and emotionlessly.

"I had always thought she was a dangerous artificial person…" said Junko in shock.

"I-is all of this part of a carefully calculated plan?" asked Yoshie.

Korone nodded and replied, "Of course. I am aiming for an efficient game over. If you leave it to me, I believe I can easily lead this to an annihilation ending."

"B-but I have some responsibility for this. I would like for you to leave it to me," said Yoshie.

Korone shook her head.

"That is all the more reason to send the other students back as soon as possible. I could also abduct you here." Korone glanced at Junko. "If you are abducted, you will be forced to appear before Akuto-san while wearing lewd clothing. This game has rules for creating offspring, so if a man and woman spend the night in the same room, a message appears saying 'we sure had fun last night, didn't we?'."

A blush exploded across Junko's face.

"Y-y-you fool! I would never do that!"

"But you did imagine it just a bit, didn't you?"

"S-stop that! Do not tease me!"

"At any rate, I will be solemnly advancing the game. If you do not like it, then advance the game yourselves as the protagonists. I will eliminate the other students, so please take a short nap. Once you wake up, make your way to the demon king's castle."

Korone swung her staff and a beam of light shot from it.

"Watch out!"

Yoshie covered for Junko, but the beam pierced through both Yoshihiko and Junko's bodies.

"Wha-…!?"

Yoshie and Junko groaned in pain.

—Even as a game, it still hurts.

Just as Yoshie had that thought, she realized what Korone had done. That had not been a fatal blow. It had only been meant to knock them out.

And then the two of them lost consciousness.

Let us move back in time just a bit.

One of the first students to flee into the school building when Korone attacked was Fujiko.

—This may be a game, but I do not like the thought being killed. And something seemed unnatural about how that Yoshihiko was acting. I need to live on and investigate this.

The structure of the school building had not changed, but the contents were quite different. The classrooms were now strategy rooms or weapon storerooms.

—Weapons… Perfect.

Fujiko turned around and spoke to those behind her.

"There are weapons here! Everyone, take something to fight with!"

Amid the long lines of spears, the piles of countless swords, and all the other weapons, Fujiko chose a whip because she was used to using one in real life. She attached it at the waist.

The students who had fled took weapons one after another. As the weapon storeroom began to grow crowded, Fujiko heard a voice from the next room over.

"There are grimoires in here! If your class lets you use them, get in here!"

—Come to think of it, I never checked on my class.

Fujiko opened a screen.

Class: Potion Master

Level: 1

HP: 5

Strength: 8

Magic: 15

Army: 0

—So there is an army stat. This does not provide much explanation, but it is obvious what that lets you do after seeing what Korone did. I need to raise my level some way or another. This may be a game, but I need to gain as much experience as I can to help me in the real world. …And most importantly, I have to help Akuto-sama grow even stronger.

Fujiko secretly decided to betray the others.

—That means I need to raise everyone's levels, strengthen them, and then have Akuto-sama defeat them. That sounds like the best plan.

With her mind made up, Fujiko headed to the neighboring grimoire room. She chose a grimoire of the Level 1 magic she could use and carried the book under her arm. When she saw most of the students had completed their preparations, she raised her voice.

"Everyone! This fortress will inevitably fall! We must split up and flee into the jungle! We will raise our level there and gather our own armies. Once the time to defeat the demon king has arrived, I will light a beacon so we can gather once more!"

Voices of approval came one after another.

"That's right. That's the best plan for us."

"We can have a bit more fun."

"Everything feels so real in here, so I don't want to die."

"We can split up into groups of two or three."

The students began to leave the grimoire and weapon rooms.

"Onee-sama! We can flee together!"

Three underclassmen who adored Fujiko ran up to her. Fujiko smiled and nodded.

"Yes, let us do that. Are your preparations complete?"

Fujiko and the girls left the room together.

The chaos had reached the hallway. The students had no solid leadership, so they had erred in their timing on closing the entrance. Korone's monster army was crossing swords with the students in the hallway. Cries of anger and the high-pitched clashing of swords hurt Fujiko's ears.

"Onee-sama! Hurry!"

One girl pulled on Fujiko's hand.

But Fujiko had a different idea as she fled.

—If I am right, this might not be as difficult as I thought.

Fujiko looked at the three girls with her. They seemed truly afraid of the situation. That was understandable. The sensations were all too real.

—That means their judgment is impaired right now.

Fujiko grinned inwardly. Fujiko chose a different route from the other students. Fujiko and the three girls were the only ones running through that

specific hallway. However, a single orc soldier was catching up to them. The three girls seemed to have no intention of fighting.

"You three run on ahead!" ordered Fujiko.

They did exactly that. They worriedly turned back toward Fujiko, but Fujiko called out to them again and they looked forward once more.

And Fujiko did not overlook that timing. She swung her whip toward the orc soldier and the end of the whip splendidly wrapped around the hilt of his sword.

"Hah!"

She pulled the whip back, taking the sword with it.

Fujiko made no attempt to stop the whip's momentum. The sword flew straight toward the back of one of the fleeing girls.

"Kyaaaah!"

The sword stabbed deep into the girl's back and she collapsed. She immediately turned to dust, leaving only the sword behind.

—Just as I thought.

Fujiko grinned.

The other students likely thought the dead girl had been killed by the orc soldier.

—You get quite a bit of experience for killing a player!

Fujiko had gained a level. She defeated the now weaponless orc soldier with several strikes of the whip.

And she met up with the two surviving girls with a perfectly calm expression.

"Are you okay!?"

"Yes, but it looks like one of us was stabbed by the sword that orc soldier threw…"

"There is no need to be sad. It may have been a shocking scene, but this is only a game."

Fujiko grinned.

"I killed 357 of them."

Korone kneeled before Akuto after returning to the castle.

"Wow! That's amazing, Korone-chan!"

Keena clapped her hands in delight as she leaned up against Akuto's shoulder.

"You're making us look like a horribly evil army, so stop that," complained Akuto from where he sat on the throne.

"This is all about setting the right mood," explained Korone before holding a crystal ball out toward Akuto.

It showed the destroyed school building, the ruined schoolyard, and the corpses of orc soldiers.

"That looks pretty bad. But I don't see any bodies of students."

"Yes. Everything remained within the boundaries of the game."

Korone lowered the crystal ball and opened a large screen in midair.

"And here you can see everyone's resentment."

"Resentment?"

Akuto peered at the screen. It was an online message board.

127 : Anonymous@Corpse : ID:mKq7EtZhO

That hurt. I thought this was a game.

128 : Anonymous@Corpse : ID:kAE5SjWcO

When Sai Akuto gets back to reality, I'm gonna kill him.

129 : Anonymous@Corpse : ID:JW75Oizl0

If you died, it just means you're weak. Give it up. orz

130 : Anonymous@Corpse : ID:KtBdqH4A0

I almost came when Korone-chan personally killed me.

131 : Anonymous@Corpse : ID:e9qeMSmd0

I was crushed by a rhino. \ (^o^) /

"Well, as long as they're alive…"

Akuto was not sure how to feel, so he just sighed.

"It seems we can view the game's real world message board from here. They can apparently see a portion of the game."

"A portion?"

"It seems they can see the overall picture and the numerical data. I checked on the message board."

"So it's the same as when we were in that book. It seemed senpai could see the overall picture of the story then. At any rate, I'm glad we can get some data from outside."

Akuto nodded.

"Now then. I will go hunt down the remnants."

Korone stood to leave.

"Could you stop making this sound so horrible?"

"A slaughter is not over until everyone is dead."

Korone made it sound all the more horrible, but Keena cut in.

"Wait. This is kind of weird."

"Weird?"

Akuto turned toward her.

"I think the game has changed a bit."

Keena motioned them over while looking at the screen.

"How has it changed?"

"Well, the final objective was to defeat the demon king, right? That's changed to acquiring the holy grail."

She pointed at the screen Korone had opened. It did indeed give the conditions to clear the game.

"Did someone change the game? You said there was an uncertain element. Does this mean that person has begun to act?" asked Akuto uneasily.

Korone nodded.

"In that case, I must slaughter them as quickly as possible. I will slaughter them without a moment's rest. I will give my undivided attention to the slaughter."

"This is the first time I've seen you this motivated," complained Akuto.

Meanwhile, in the real world.

"What did you say happened to my school?" asked Lily in a displeased voice.

She had already heard the situation. She had returned to the school after all the students had disappeared, but then students had started to appear here and there. And they were all insisting on the ridiculous idea that they had been caught inside a video game.

"But if the virtual alternate dimension was used, it could make sense, arinsu."

"Uga."

"In fact, this kind of supports the information we had gathered, gya. The plan was to seal the demon king in the virtual alternate dimension, gya"

The three officers attempted to pacify Lily as she groaned within the student council room.

"If there's a connection between this game and the virtual alternate dimension, shouldn't you investigate the creator of the game?" asked Hiroshi as he looked at the mana screen.

He was also in the student council room because he had been forcibly dragged into all this and could no longer back out.

"The creator?"

Lily looked over at the mana screen disinterestedly, but gasped when she saw the name.

"Yoshihiko? Yoshihiko… Kanna, you were pursuing a Kita Yoshie, right?"

"Yes, gya. I think she's definitely involved with this somehow, gya. But all her data was erased and she's currently missing, gya."

"That's because Yoshihiko is in the game!"

Lily stood up.

"What are you going to do, gya?"

"It's nothing but circumstantial evidence, but it's enough to make some threats! I need to go get some information from the people with a connection to her," said Lily energetically.

"That sounds really dangerous…" said Hiroshi worriedly, but Lily grabbed his hand. "Eh?"

"You're coming, too! You're already part of all this."

"Wah! W-wait! Give me a break, president!"

But Hiroshi's protests were splendidly ignored.

"Nn…"

Junko woke up.

Once she remembered why she had passed out, she forcefully sat up. Unlike in reality, her mind was perfectly clear after waking up in the game. She had no headache and her body moved smoothly.

"What…?"

Junko saw the ruined schoolyard. Korone's army had already left, the school building had tragically crumbled, and the students were nowhere to be seen.

"Kh… So this is what it feels like to lose a battle. I know this is just a game, but it does not feel good. We need to take the initiative from now on."

Yoshihiko looked up from where he lay collapsed next to her. His well-featured face was twisted in non-physical pain. Junko understood how he felt. He regretted that so many students had died due to him.

"I know this does not feel good, but if we do not focus, we will not get another chance. Then again, this is just a game, so maybe we do not need to think about it so seriously."

Junko smiled at him.

Yoshihiko's eyes opened in admiration.

"Amazing. You said your name is Hattori-san, correct? You're used to fighting, aren't you?"

"I do not think that is a good compliment to give to a girl."

When Junko intentionally pouted a bit, Yoshihiko finally smiled.

"My apologies. You are right. To phrase it better, I was struck by your nobility."

Yoshihiko's smile looked very bright to Junko, but that was not simply because of his looks. It was due to his carefree and honest expression and the fact that the compliment came from his heart.

—This is the second time a boy has viewed me so positively.

That thought suddenly came to Junko, but she frantically shook her head and worked to keep it from showing on her face.

"I-I will accept that compliment. A-anyway, how many people do you think escaped?"

Yoshihiko opened a screen.

"A lot of them were killed. About three hundred. We were beaten down splendidly. The efficiency approached the limits of the settings. There are some parts of command that your parameters cannot make up for. This was simply the player's skill."

"That is amazing," commented Junko in admiration.

She knew Korone's combat command ability came from being a L'Isle-Adam, but she still admired her for it.

"But that is not actually a problem. The skill of that L'Isle-Adam means more of the students will be returned to reality."

"But the students at our school are used to fighting. It seems they scattered into the jungle. They likely plan to kill the demon king in order to clear the game."

"In that case, we must go too."

Yoshihiko stood up.

"Go? Go where?"

Junko was confused.

Yoshihiko nodded and explained.

"Into the jungle. That is the only place to hide. If we are to fight well, we must first build up experience. Also, the monsters will drop weapons. We need to gather equipment too. As that L'Isle-Adam named Korone said, there is someone lurking in here who is ignoring the rules. We cannot do anything without looking into that, and we cannot walk freely throughout the game world without experience and items."

With that said, Yoshihiko headed into the jungle.

Junko hesitated.

"Eh? Wait…"

"What is it?"

"B-but this will mean the two of us are alone together."

"That cannot be helped, so how about we work together? Also, I feel something similar to respect when it comes to you. Do not worry."

Yoshihiko gave a carefree smile.

"R-right. That is right. Yes. Understood. You are right."

Junko was confused.

—Being carefree is fine and all… But why does he not seem to realize we will be a guy and girl alone together? Is it because this is a game? Or…

Junko of course did not know that Yoshihiko was actually Yoshie.

—Ahh! This is no time to be nervous. At least he seems to be a gentleman.

Junko followed after Yoshihiko.

Junko hunted under Yoshihiko's instruction until sunset.

"Hoh!"

She cut down a Giant Bat with the short sword Yoshihiko had lent her. The Giant Bat let out a high-pitched shriek as it died. Its body would eventually disappear, but the fact that its body remained at all proved it was a monster of this world rather than a player. And occasionally, an item would appear next to a monster's dead body.

"A knife. I earned this myself. You can have your short sword back."

Junko held the knife in a backhand grip and swung it.

"And I am more used to this kind of weapon."

"You are a ninja, after all. A Suhara-style Japanese sword would be best, though. Anyway, defeat a few more to level up high enough to use scrolls."

Under Yoshihiko's instructions, Junko gained even more levels.

Finally, night came.

"A day in the game is equivalent to about an hour in reality," explained Yoshihiko as he set up the camp.

He threw what looked like a small model, and a tent and campfire appeared in the jungle clearing.

"That is convenient."

Impressed, Junko sat next to the fire.

"By the way, what will we do tomorrow other than raise our levels further?"

Yoshihiko opened a screen, displayed a map, and pointed at the center.

"There is a powerful weapon here. The monster guarding it is powerful, but there is a trick that allows you to defeat it even at low levels. We should try to-… Huh?"

"What is it?"

Yoshihiko's expression was quite serious. He shook his head as if to say something was wrong.

"The game's objective has changed. It says to search for the holy grail."

"Can the game be changed like that?"

"Of course it can. However, not even I can do it while inside here. Only someone outside the game can do it. But I had it protected. And if that isn't it…it must be related to the uncertain element."

Yoshihiko brought a hand to his chin as he thought.

"We just have to be careful, right? There is no need to worry that much. And there is no sign of an accident having occurred," said Junko to cheer him up.

"Your truly dignified mindset is most encouraging. I am glad you are the one I got to know so well," said Yoshihiko in a gentle voice.

"Wha-…? That is going too far."

Junko looked away.

"No, I mean it. I am not very good at opening up to others. I always try to be honest, but I do not have many friends."

"I am not sure how to respond to that. …But I understand. We have no choice but to work together for now, so I will try to listen to what you say," replied Junko embarrassedly to Yoshihiko's straightforward words.

"That is good to hear. I originally created this technology in the hopes of providing true communication in this virtual alternate dimension."

"True communication?"

"Yes. Pure communication. With a space in which one is freed from the physical body, I thought people could live more happily."

"Sorry, but I am not too good with difficult concepts like this."

Junko shook her head with a bitter smile.

Yoshihiko smiled sadly.

"I was mostly just complaining. Sorry for bringing up such a boring topic. Let's get to sleep."

Yoshihiko moved from the fire and opened the tent.

"Wait…"

Junko blushed and shook her hands.

"Get to sleep? In the one tent?"

Yoshihiko tilted his head slightly.

"Is that a problem?"

"Y-you idiot! Of course it is!"

Junko's voice grew a bit louder.

Yoshihiko tilted his head even further.

"Well, I suppose you're right. It would be a bit cramped. …Oh!" He clapped his hands together. "There is a camp in your equipment, too."

"Eh?"

Junko dug through her pocket. There was indeed a model tent like the one Yoshihiko had thrown. Throwing it would likely create a campfire as well.

—What was he thinking?

An unpleasant uneasiness filled Junko's chest.

"I am going to sleep."

Junko created her tent and climbed inside. While wrapped in the sleeping bag inside, she dully looked up at the top of the tent.

—Ahh, I just can't settle down. What is this feeling? Oh, I know. This is a lot like the feeling he gives me.

Akuto's face appeared in Junko's mind. She rolled over with the sleeping bag and curled up.

—Come to think of it, they are kind of similar. Do I have a weakness for that type?

Junko ended up worrying over that all night.

—I'm not really the type to get worried when I cross a perilous bridge.

2V gave a self-derisive laugh.

She was the type that did not cross the perilous bridge in the first place. That had gone beyond being a policy and was now a subconscious habit. Any dangerous actions would be handled by the dolls and the dolls would self-destruct if any information was about to leak out. She even had dolls purchase the dolls and primarily used common models. It was all to ensure it could not be traced back to her.

But she was now touching the terminal a bit fearfully.

2V had no choice but to hack in through top level security. And to do that, she was forced to use her fixed mana waves. In other words, she had to identify herself as the real 2V. Basically, she was trying to reach the depths of the god by proving she was 2V of CIMO 8.

—CIMO 8 authority isn't enough to reach the high priest level. From there on, I have to hack.

She had a reason to dive down to that deep level.

"I doubt even the high priest has noticed that entry. After all, it looks like unimportant data. But in truth…"

2V hurriedly touched the mana screen while muttering to herself.

Her true form was a sickly-looking girl. Her slender arms and legs were wrapped in simple white clothes and she did nothing but operate terminals in a dimly lit room filled with dolls. She was filled with a certain sort of beauty.

—I've never taken a truly serious action before. It's almost laughable that I'm typing on a terminal like some kind of geek. My hands hurt and my eyes hurt. I never thought I would get lost in something like this.

Text scrolled by on the mana screen before 2V's eyes. She had arrived at the deepest depths of the god Megis.

"This area is only accessed when the high priest rewrites the program," muttered 2V.

<High priest ID confirmed. Please select a command.>

2V heard the voice of the archbishop…that is, the L'Isle-Adam that conveyed the words of Megis. It seemed she had fooled the system splendidly.

"I want to view the data on the sealed demon king."

<Understood. The data is read only. It will be automatically erased from your terminal.>

"I only need to see it once."

2V's eyes frantically followed the data scrolling across the mana screen. She memorized it all.

And after storing it all in her brain after a single read through, she immediately severed the connection and did her best to erase all trace of her actions.

After finishing that, she finally burst out laughing as if she could not hold it back.

"Heh heh heh… Hee hee… Ha ha ha! I never thought it went this far. This is great. Everything I hoped for is here. I never once thought I would come across such good fortune. And it was so easy. It's almost disappointingly easy."

2V's voice started out calm but grew more and more excited.

As her sickly cheeks grew disturbingly pink, 2V opened another mana screen and broke through the security Yoshie had set up.

"But this will work. She's inside, so I can cross this perilous bridge as many times as necessary. Heh. I'm beginning to understand why normal people spend all day enjoying themselves at this age. I never knew such worthless things could be so exciting. It's hard to resist."

2V grinned as she altered the program and set up a trap.

"The original demon king. That existence was created to destroy the system of the world at the time, but it will work well enough even now!"

When Hiroshi realized where Lily had taken him, he could not help but gulp. They had arrived at the temple of Megis.

There were exceptions, but normal people were usually allowed as far as the main hall of the temples. Entertainment facilities would be built inside and a shopping center was often built around them.

However, Lily brought him to an area normal people were not allowed. This was where the clerks and priests worked.

"Sh-should we really be in here?" asked Hiroshi nervously.

"It isn't a problem. I made an appointment to speak about some secrets."

"Oh, that's good."

"Not that I gave them a chance to say no," added Lily quietly.

"W-wait! What do you mean by that!?"

Hiroshi panicked, but Lily's expression remained unconcerned.

"I sent an email saying I was coming so he needs to stay in his office."

"That's all?"

"What more is needed?"

"Well, I suppose that's fine. But with who?"

"The high priest."

"Wah! Please give me a break!"

"Why do we need to fear someone just because they have an important position?"

Lily laughed, but there were two guards standing before the door to the special areas on the upper floors.

"You need permission to pass through here," said one of the guards.

"Ee! S-sorry…"

Hiroshi apologized, but Lily calmly walked over and looked up at them with a grin.

"I'm Shiraishi's daughter."

"The priest's?"

The guards looked surprised at Lily's self-introduction, but quickly returned to the expressionless look of a guard. One of the pointed to the right.

"Even Priest Shiraishi's daughter needs permission. At the very least, you need a temporary guest pass."

"It doesn't really matter," said Lily bluntly.

She stroked her right fist with her left hand and grinned.

The two guards moved and tension filled the atmosphere.

However, a new voice cut in.

"It's fine. Let them through."

That low, kind voice came from beyond the door.

"High priest…"

The guards saluted and stiffened.

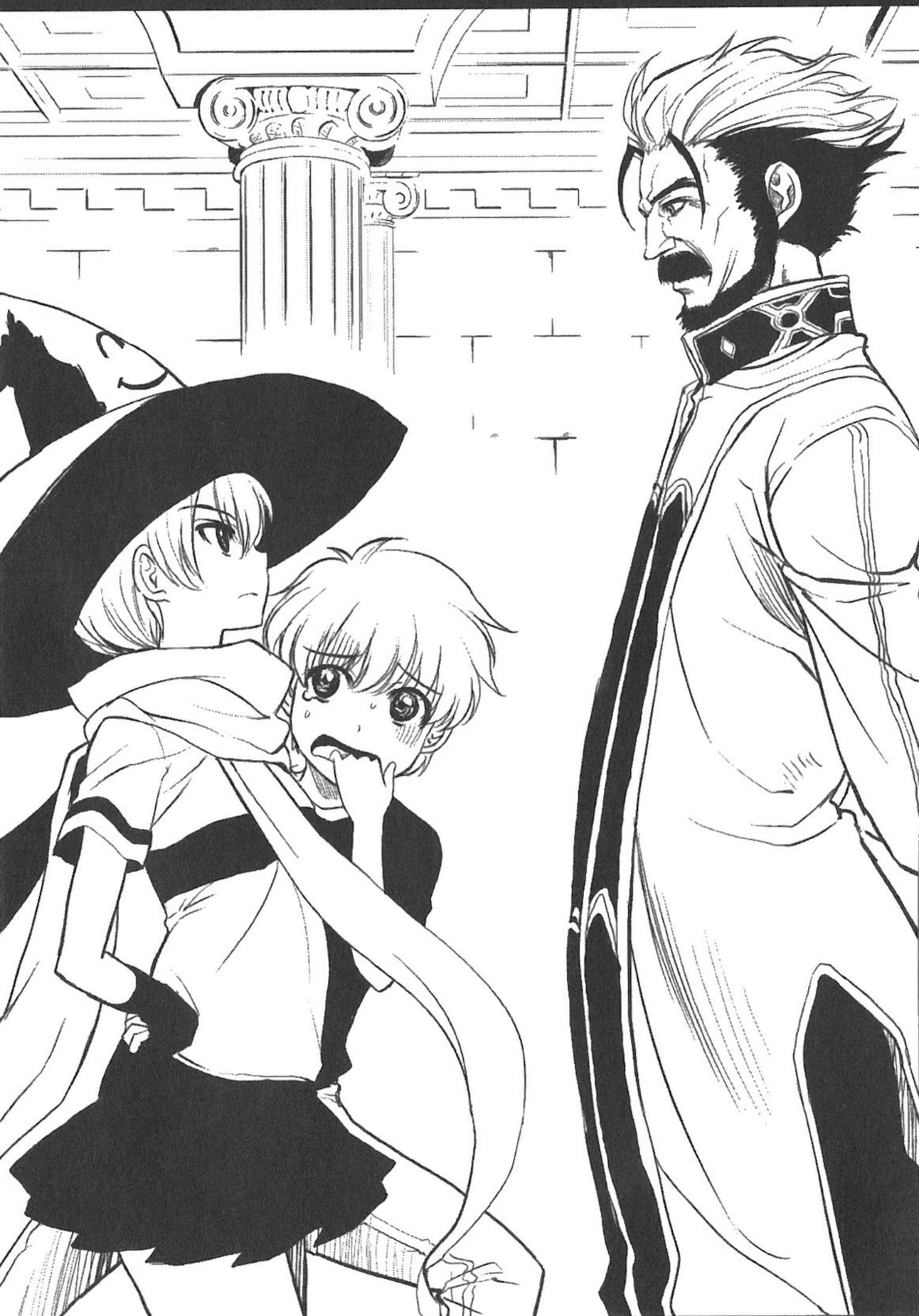
Kita Hidehiko appeared. The man had gray mixed in with his hair and looked solidly honest. But if one looked, one could see something frightening in his eyes. That self-consciously strong light resembled madness.

"Thank you for understanding."

Lily bowed in greeting. As a girl, it was not required that she took off her hat, but not removing that large, stylish hat and her earlier attitude made it seem she was mocking him.

But Hidehiko let Lily and Hiroshi through.

And after walking down the passageway far enough that the guards could not hear, he opened his mouth.



"I have heard about my daughter's mistake. I suppose it should not surprise me that Shiraishi's daughter would try to threaten me using that."

"I don't want to talk about family. That father of mine will still accept if you challenge him to a fight."

"Fathers worry about their daughters. I doubt you would understand at your age, though."

"Sorry, but I'm not old enough to worry about having an heir."

Hiroshi had been doing nothing but sweat as he listened to the way Lily spoke. Hidehiko was still smiling, but Hiroshi did not know how long that would last.

Once they entered the high priest's office, Hidehiko circled to the opposite side of the desk, urged them to sit, and then sat himself. He opened a mana screen and asked Lily to speak.

"The Birdcage Project."

Lily spoke only that one phrase.

But it was enough to make Hidehiko's eyebrows twitch.

"Are you trying to say Yoshie is involved in that?"

"Yes. And a video game she wrote is involved as well. I couldn't tell you how that happened, though."

Lily slid a mana screen of her own toward Hidehiko. It contained the information she had and the conjectures she had made based on it.

The Birdcage Project was a plan meant to seal the demon king in the virtual alternate dimension.

That virtual alternate dimension was used to protect the god Megis.

And the academy had ended up involved in it all.

"I personally had Yoshie-san tracked. I found no definitive proof, but I have no doubt she took part in this. However, the fact that she is inside that game is proof enough."

Lily displayed footage of the game on the screen. It displayed Yoshihiko's data.

"A little bit of investigation should prove that Yoshihiko-san is the same person as Yoshie-san. We only need to check the temple's communication data. You should be able to do that here," said Lily.

"That is not necessary," said Hidehiko with a shake of the head. "I already knew all this to a certain extent."

"To a certain extent?"

"I knew my daughter was performing research online."

"Did you know she was participating in this project?"

"Yes. But this is the first I have heard of the academy being involved. Since you came here to inform me of this, I assume you want to make some kind of deal."

Hidehiko must have already resigned himself to this or had some other idea because all expression vanished from his face.

Lily grinned.

"I want information on the person behind this plan. With that, we can handle everything being done to the academy."

"You mean codename 2V? Understood. I will do what I can."

"That was easy. It makes me suspect you have some ulterior motive here."

"I am not plotting anything. I did not like this plan from the beginning. That is all. …At any rate, look at this."

Hidehiko slid a mana screen toward Lily. It displayed the log of the terminal Yoshie used, but that terminal was currently in use.

"The terminal is in use!?"

Lily gulped.

"Yoshie is inside that game, so this cannot be her. The connection is coming from a different location as well. It is being hacked," said Hidehiko.

"That means… This is 2V!"

Lily's expression changed.

When Hidehiko saw that look, he nodded toward her.

"In all likelihood, yes. This is for the sake of my daughter, so I will uphold my end of the bargain. Please tell me how to contact you. I will send you whatever information I find. You want to head to the location of this connection, don't you?"

"Thanks!"

Lily bowed and ran out of the high priest's office.

Junko continued leveling up the following day.

"I think I have gotten the hang of this."

Junko's weapon was now a Japanese sword and Yoshihiko had gained a few levels despite having started out at a higher level. They were now able to defeat fairly powerful monsters when working together.

"We should be fine heading to the center of the map like this," said Yoshihiko after they defeated several Bugbears.

"You said there is a powerful weapon there, right?"

"Yes. It is a sword that helps defeat the demon king. It is the most powerful weapon in the game."

"Wouldn't everyone be after it then?"

"The monster protecting it is powerful, so it is difficult to defeat without knowing the trick. Unfortunately, I was unable to tell everyone what that is before they scattered."

"With our students, that would have led to fighting over who got the sword," said Junko.

Yoshihiko laughed.

"Ha ha ha. I'm not sure whether I should be sad people fight even in a game or if I should be glad they can safely enjoy fighting this way."

"I was taught that controlling when you fight is part of being a warrior."

Junko intended that as a casual comment, but Yoshihiko seemed quite impressed.

"I see. I need to learn the teachings of other sects as well. That is a view worth listening to. Or perhaps it is your personal ideas which are wonderful."

"S-stop saying that kind of thing with a straight face…"

Junko tried to pass it off as a joke, but she still blushed and looked away.

It was only the second day, but they had already reached the point of being able to talk naturally.

"I have a straight face because I mean it."

"E-enough of that. That weapon's location is more important."

Yoshihiko pointed forward.

"To be honest, we are already headed there. That is the location right there."

A rocky mountain rose up ahead of them.

"So it is at the peak?"

Junko looked up at the mountain.

Once they arrived at the foot of the mountain, a path became visible. Some of the higher parts of the path seemed to require crossing chains driven into the rock.

"So we will be attacked by a powerful monster on that path? That sounds difficult," muttered Junko.

"It will be fine," said Yoshihiko. "There is a volcanic crater at the peak and there is another narrow path there. If we can escape along it, the monster will get stuck in the narrowest portion. That's how we'll do it."

"I see. So it is a secret trick."

Junko began up the narrow path.

The mountain path was dangerous and there was almost no footing as they approached the peak, but Junko had no problem with heights. She even led Yoshihiko along as he was having trouble.

"The path around the crater forms a ring and one portion of that ring is narrower than the rest. That's the spot."

Yoshihiko pointed at a certain spot once they were able to see the several hundred meter path circling the crater. The path was only barely wide enough for one person to pass through.

"There is a sword in the crater. Once we walk down the path inside, we will encounter the guardian monster."

Junko nodded at Yoshihiko's explanation.

"And we will return to the path around the crater and guide it to that narrow spot?"

"Yes. We will flee to the left. If you do not mess up there, you will be fine," assured Yoshihiko.

And so they walked down the path into the crater.

After heading down several dozen meters, they arrived at the edge of a lake of lava.

"With all this heat, how are we supposed to enter the lava? And I do not see a sword anywhere," said Junko as she looked at the red lava at her feet.

Yoshihiko urged her to prepare to run.

"Once the guardian monster is defeated, the lava disappears. Here it comes."

Just as he finished speaking, the center of the lava lake swelled up as if a fountain had been turned on. That fountain of molten rock gained even more momentum and reached a height of over ten meters while sending a spray of lava everywhere.

"Something is rising up from the below the lava!"

"That is Ifrit. It's going to chase us."

Yoshihiko began running and Junko followed.

She looked over her shoulder and glimpsed a ten meter or greater humanoid shape within the lava. As that scorched humanoid thing walked through the lava, the lava gathered around it and blew fire everywhere.

"I know this is game, but that is a terrifying sight," said Junko in admiration.

It was a ten-meter-plus flame Jinn. It had an amazing intensity.

Ifrit slowly approached Junko and Yoshihiko. However, its large steps meant it was quickly approaching Junko's back even though she was running.

"Hurry," said Yoshihiko calmly as he let Junko go on ahead. Their speed was equal to Ifrit's while climbing the slope, but they would be able to gain a lead on Ifrit on the flat path around the crater.

Junko maintained her distance with Ifrit and entered that path. She turned ninety degrees and continued to run.

However…

"That's the wrong way! I said to turn left!" cried Yoshihiko.

"Eh?"

Junko stopped running. She turned around to find Yoshihiko a short distance away. Also, Ifrit was moving in between the two of them.

"Oh, no!"

Junko realized she had mistaken his meaning when he said to turn to the "left". Junko could be careless even when she appeared to do everything precisely.

And Ifrit turned toward Junko and began moving forward.

"Wah!"

Junko had no choice but to run forward.

"No, you can't run that way. The path is too rough to run properly. It will catch up to you," pointed out Yoshihiko from behind Ifrit, but she had no other option.

"Wh-what am I supposed to do?" asked Junko frantically.

"I will attack from behind, but Ifrit is made to continually pursue its target. You will have to fight somehow or another," said Yoshihiko while remaining extremely calm given the situation.

"S-somehow or another?"

Junko turned around, leaped toward Ifrit as it approached, and struck it in the chest with her Japanese sword.

"I hit it!"

She jumped back and looked up to check the result of her attack.

"What!?"

The attack had not been enough to stop Ifrit's advance. That giant form wrapped in lava and flames continued forward as if nothing had happened.

"It's slow so it cannot avoid attacks very well, but it has a lot of stamina. Also…"

Before Yoshihiko could continue, Ifrit spread its arms, stuck out its chest, and roared toward the heavens. And as it roared, countless granular bulges appeared on its chest.

"What?" asked Junko in confusion.

"It can fire countless bullets as an attack. Those are difficult to avoid."

By the time Yoshihiko said that, countless flaming stones were already raining down around Junko.

"Waaaaah!"

Junko managed to jump back and forth avoiding the falling stones, but there were simply too many of them.

"Wait…. How long…is this going to last!?"

She let out a scream.

One of the flaming stones had struck her.

She was knocked to the side, another one hit her, and she was slammed to the ground. And then the shower of flaming stones finally let up.

"Not good."

Yoshihiko used recovery magic.

Junko immediately stood up, but the situation had not improved.

"Wh-what am I supposed to do?" she asked.

Yoshihiko responded calmly once more.

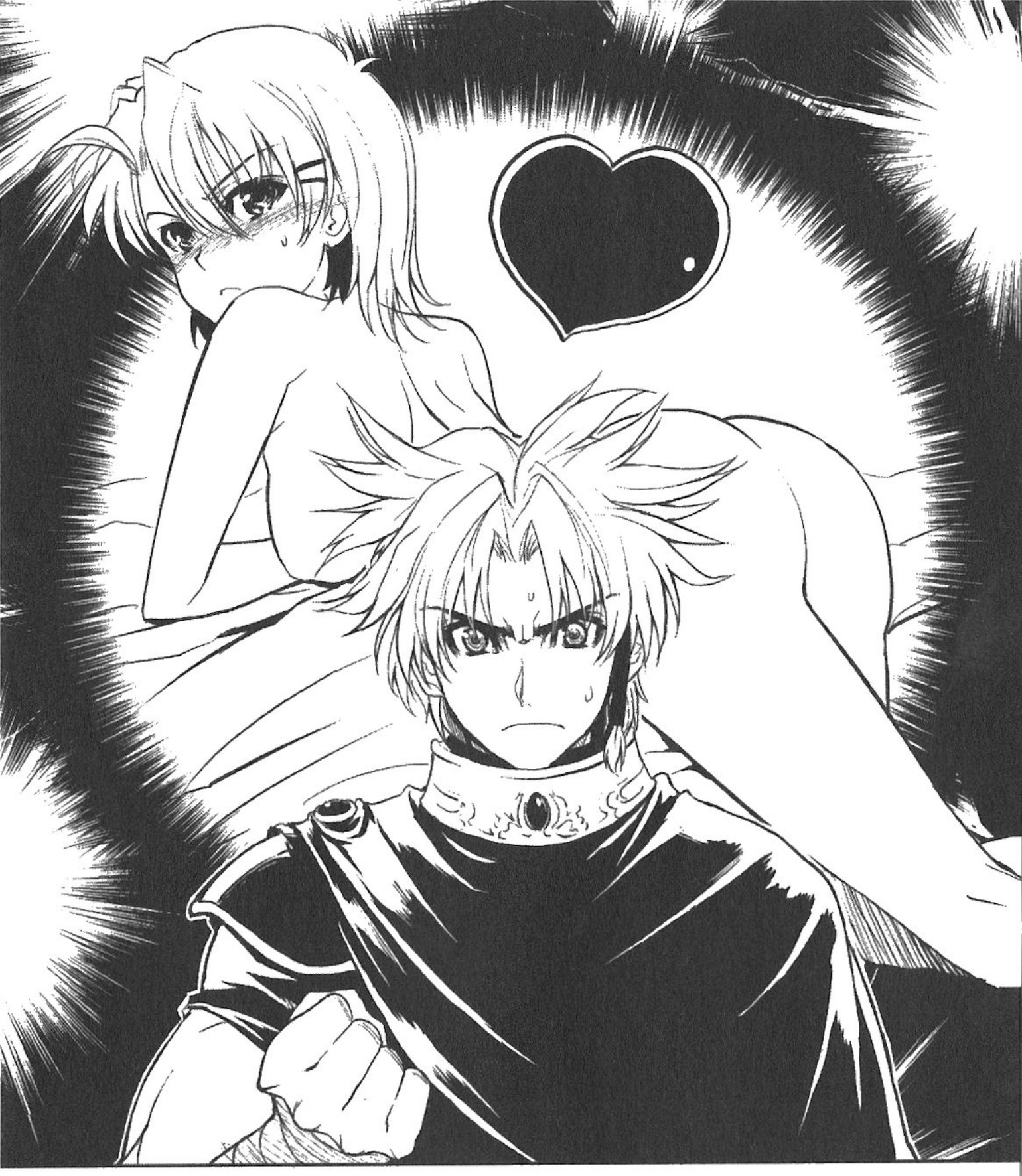
"I will continue to attack it from behind, but you will have to outlast five of those attacks before I can defeat Ifrit. Also, if you are not fully healed, being hit once will kill you. The problem is I can only use my recovery magic three more times."

"Thanks for the analysis. So basically, I just need to keep dodging?"

"Exactly. But this is not an issue of your reflexes. This is a serious issue on the game side of things. If you do not have the proper stats, you will be hit by the stones no matter how quick your reflexes."

"You mean there is nothing I can do?"

Junko began to panic.



Ifrit was already preparing to fire the flaming stones again.

"No! There is one way you can do this!" announced Yoshihiko as if to say everything would be all right.

"What is that?" asked Junko hopefully.

However…

"Take off your clothes! All of them!"

"What…?"

"Take off your clothes. Strip naked!" repeated Yoshihiko.

"Wait… Don't you realize the situation here!?" shouted Junko.

However, Yoshihiko nodded with a serious expression.

"Take off your clothes. Please listen to me!"

"D-do you have any idea what you-…bgh!"

She was unable to say "are saying?" The next shower of flaming stones was fired. It struck Junko and she collapsed to the ground.

"You need to take off your clothes. You can't even keep your underwear on," said Yoshihiko as he used recovery magic.

"Wh-what kind of nonsense is this?" protested Junko as she got up after being healed.

However, she received a serious and absolutely unavoidable response.

"A ninja gains greater evasion the more clothes they remove. It triples when they're naked!"

"Liar!" shouted Junko.

But Yoshihiko did not falter.

"I am merely saying this is more efficient. Your level is high enough that doing that will let you evade while I defeat Ifrit!"

Yoshihiko – that is, Yoshie – was the type to push aside her emotions and focus on efficiency. And in this case, she had completely forgotten that Junko saw her as a guy. She assumed Junko's refusal to strip was due to

her being extremely shy. She felt it was ridiculous to choose defeat just because you were embarrassed. That was why the words Yoshihiko shouted seemed so ridiculous to Junko.

"Take off your clothes! Don't be embarrassed! No one is watching but me! And if you do find it embarrassing, at least start by taking off some of your clothes! If you do that, you will be able to feel the freedom it gives you!"

"Are you from some kind of nudist colony!?" complained Junko, but a stone struck her in the head immediately afterwards. "Gah!"

"I can only heal you one more time!"

"Uuh… I just…I just have to strip, right!? At least face the other way!" shouted Junko in despair after being healed and standing up.

But her determination received an inelegant response.

"If I face the other way, I cannot attack Ifrit!"

"Then I'm only taking off one piece of clothing!"

As she complained, Junko placed a hand on her clothes and quickly removed a piece. Chainmail was revealed below.

"If you do not remove the chainmail, I won't do anything!"

"S-stop commenting on it!"

Having gone this far, Junko used the momentum of removing that one piece to remove the chainmail as well. She now wore nothing but a sarashi on her upper body.

"Th-that's enough, right!? Huh…?"

Junko was confused. She stopped complaining because she felt the freedom of her body suddenly rise dramatically.

"What is this…!?"

It had not tripled, but she was now able to avoid the next shower of flaming stones when she focused. She also felt like the speed of her falls had grown slower.

"That's good. But to be sure, you should strip completely naked."

"Enough! I could evade well enough, so this is fine!" shouted Junko.

Yoshihiko shook his head.

"But when Ifrit dies, it sends even more stones shooting down in every direction!"

And precisely that happened soon thereafter.

Ifrit's body shrank down, but only so it could fire out even more flaming stones. Those stones rained down with such density that they seemed to fill the sky.

"You idiooooottttttt!"

As she cried, Junko reached for her skirt.

And…

Ifrit vanished.

But behind where it had been, Junko was crouched down trying to cover her nudity with her hands.

"Uuh… Such humiliation."

Yoshihiko walked over and handed her her clothes.

"Sorry about that. You did well despite being so embarrassed."

"You idiot! Do you not know how to have a bit of delicacy!?" shouted Junko as she grabbed her clothes.

Yoshihiko was shocked by this reaction and stood perfectly still.

"S-sorry. I seem to not understand some of the subtleties of people's feelings. Um… Could you forgive me? I focused too much on acting efficiently in the game."

Junko was confused by how much of a reaction Yoshihiko gave and how honestly he apologized. She quickly fell to resignation.

—Getting angry is not going to help. He is just that kind of person.

"N-next time, try to think about how the other person will feel."

Junko had Yoshihiko look away and then she dressed herself.

"I really am sorry. This might also be why I got the academy caught up in all this."

Yoshihiko spoke his regrets while facing away.

"I understand, so do not worry about it too much," said Junko once she was fully dressed.

Yoshihiko shook his head.

"I am simply reflecting on myself. I researched the virtual alternate dimension because I was focusing on direct communication with other people, so I should be worried if I do not understand how other people feel. Or perhaps it is because I do not understand how they feel that I was researching the virtual alternate dimension. Maybe I wanted to be able to truly understand others." Yoshihiko turned around and smiled at Junko. "Someday I will become the kind of person you can approve of. I hope we can deepen our relationship when that time comes."

"Wha-…?"

Junko blushed and stood stock still.

—D-did he just confess to me?

"Wh-what are you saying?"

When Yoshihiko saw how confused Junko was, he shook his head regrettably.

"I still have a long way to go."

"N-no, you… wait. What am I saying? That is not what I meant. It's just, um…well…"

Junko grew flustered, but Yoshihiko began walking while paying her no heed.

This felt anticlimactic to Junko.

—It would be weird for me to ask him what he meant by that. Anyway, this is no time to be worrying about this.

While Junko's mind was filled with that, Yoshihiko pointed ahead toward the path leading into the crater. The lava lake was gone, exposing the black rock below.

"With Ifrit gone, the lava disappears, too," explained Yoshihiko before telling Junko to look at the center.

"There is a sword."

Junko noticed a single sword stabbing into the center of the crater.

"Let's go."

Yoshihiko climbed down into the crater.

Junko followed, but stopped after a bit.

"Wait. I sense a presence."

"A presence?"

Yoshihiko turned around and Junko nodded.

"Someone is here. Maybe a student followed us."

"That would be good. Once we have the sword, I intended to head to the demon king's…"

Yoshihiko trailed off because a figure appeared on the path leading to the crater.

A footstep on the stone was followed by the sound of something being dragged. The figure that appeared was that of a short girl.

"Who is that? I do not recognize her. She is not from my class."

Junko took a defensive stance.

The short girl bent over in response.

She looked unbalanced. This was not because there was anything wrong with her body. She looked odd because she was only about 120 centimeters tall yet she wore a nearly 180 centimeter sword on her back. Her hair was tied in a ponytail so long that it skimmed across the ground which added to the strange impression she gave.

But there was nothing noticeably wrong with her face or body. In fact, they were both too perfect. Her face had a doll-like beauty to it. Her body was well proportioned and one could easily imagine that her arms and legs could pull of actions with machine-like agility.

"No matter your identity, you must not be permitted into the sealed land."

The girl's voice was somehow youthful, but the bold and antiquated manner of speaking made her all the more unbalanced.

"The sealed land? Then are you protecting this place?" asked Junko.

"Indeed. I have long protected this land," replied a bold voice.

"A guardian…. But we defeated Ifrit. Is she a new guardian?"

Junko turned around to ask Yoshihiko.

He shook his head.

"The game has no such character."

"Are…you sure?"

Junko sounded nervous. She had heard the game might change, but she guessed the appearance of a character with a will of its own was a very strange occurrence.

"Wait. But that sounded like what a character from a game would say. And you could call this a sealed land, right?"

Yoshihiko had to admit she was right about that, but he shook his head all the same.

"True, but that isn't it. I am certain there is no character like this in the game. This is dangerous."

"Then is she the uncertain element?"

"It would seem so," said Yoshihiko with a tense expression.

However, the short girl did not seem to like them speaking in private.

"I am not fond of private discussions! Since it has come to this…"

The short girl placed a hand on the sword on her back.

Junko prepared herself, but she realized the girl was too short to draw a sword that long.

Her arm would naturally not reach any further than an arm's length up from her shoulder, but the blade was taller than she was tall.

The short girl stretched her arm up as far as it would go while gripping the sword's hilt. The sword slid a bit from its scabbard, but it was still solidly held within.

"You should have known that would happen…"

Junko could not believe what she was seeing as the short girl quickly realized what she "should have known would happen".

"My name is Keisu. I have nothing against you, but my duty requires that I cut you down!"

The short girl naming herself Keisu pushed the sword down in its scabbard and then drew it again. Except she practically threw the sword this time. As she drew it, she let go of the hilt, letting the sword slide from its scabbard and fly into the air.

"Ahh!"

Junko looked up as the bare blade soared through the sky. With the empty scabbard on her back, Keisu jumped into the air after it. She skillfully grabbed the sword in midair, balled herself up, and rotated with her long hair fluttering about. Keisu became a dangerous ball with a blade growing from it as she launched toward Junko.

"Watch out!"

Yoshihiko smoothly moved in front of Junko. He drew his sword and blocked Keisu's sword as she fell from the air with tremendous force.

A metallic noise rang out as if two pieces of heavy machinery had struck each other. Keisu's tremendous blow knocked Yoshihiko backwards.

"Yoshihiko!" called Junko reflexively.

But even as he was knocked away, Yoshihiko did not lose his balance.

"Do not worry. I can handle this much."

Yoshihiko smiled at Junko.

"What!? Is this any time to try to act cool!?" shouted Junko.

"This is not part of the game, so I cannot say what will happen. It is my responsibility to handle it."

Yoshihiko would not back down.

"Cease speaking such nonsense! Do not mock me like this!"

Keisu once more jumped around like a ball while swinging her sword around. Either the sword was quite heavy or Keisu was quite light because she was completely swung around by the sword. But this must have been her style of fighting because every strike was quite accurate. And while she could only send one attack at a time, she continually rotated to send an endless stream of attacks.

If they had not been in that vast stony crater, Yoshihiko would have been easily driven into a corner. However, he was still unable to do anything but endure Keisu's attacks.

"Yoshihiko!"

Junko tried to find an opening to attack Keisu, but the area all around the short girl constantly had the white blade slicing through it.

"You said you are protecting this land, but what is it you are protecting!?" asked Yoshihiko while receiving the attacks.

Keisu replied surprisingly honestly.

"What it is I protect is a secret, but that which is protected is of course a secret!"

Answering honestly was fine, but Keisu may not have been very smart.

"Are you protecting that sword?"

"No! My protection is needed to ensure the demon king does not acquire the holy grail! …Wait. I feel like I just gave away the secret…"

Keisu tilted her head.

"Wait. In that case, we are not trying to get in your way!" said Yoshihiko, but Keisu did not stop attacking.

"Even so, this is my duty. I cannot stop attacking until I lose!"

"Then you will stop attacking if you lose?"

"A warrior does not go back on her word! In fact, losing means death! Of course I will stop."

"In that case…"

Yoshihiko stuck his sword out forwards and stopped moving.

"You are wide open!"

Keisu did not overlook that instant and she attacked.

"Yoshihiko!" shouted Junko when she saw it.

Keisu's sword flew in an arc that would certainly sever Yoshihiko's head.

She was short, but she swiftly passed by Yoshihiko's side as he stood still. Her sword swept right through his neck.

"Ee!"

Junko let out a short shriek. She had known Yoshihiko had no real knowledge of swordplay. He had been stronger than Junko in this virtual alternate dimension, but only because it was a game. He had been able to fight because he knew the rules so thoroughly. When it came down to swordplay against an existence from outside the game, it was readily apparent he would lose. Keisu was skilled enough to give even Junko trouble in the real world.

As Yoshihiko stood perfectly still, he began to disappear. When one died in the game, they turned to dust. However, his image blurred in a way Junko had not seen before. While Yoshihiko stood as still as a statue, the area around him blurred as if a mosaic had been placed over it.

"Don't tell me he really is…"

She could not bear to say the word "dead".

But Keisu seemed perfectly convinced of her victory.

"To die in battle is an honor for a warrior. There is nothing to grieve over."

Keisu turned toward Junko and raised her sword.

Junko had no time to be lost in sentimentality. Yoshihiko was disappearing with his sword still pointed forward. Ensuring her own survival came before checking on his survival.

"Come at me!"

Keisu prepared to swing her sword around as before. She first swung the large sword upwards.

However…

Keisu's body floated up into the air. She had not jumped. She was hanging down from the sword.

"Wh-what are you doing!? No, who is this!?"

Keisu flailed around while hanging down from the sword's hilt. When she looked over her shoulder, a look of shock appeared on her face.

"How!?"

"Ahh!" cried Junko in surprise.

The one holding the sword up between gauntleted hands was Yoshihiko. And yet the disappearing image of him still existed a short distance away.

"I knew I would never win in a straight fight, so I took advantage of a graphical bug," said Yoshihiko.

"A bug!? What do you mean a bug!?"

Keisu continued to struggle, but Yoshihiko swung the sword around, her hands slipped from the hilt, and she flew through the air.

"Whaaat!?"

Keisu fell to the ground and rolled for a bit.

"A bug?" asked Junko as she walked over to Yoshihiko.

Yoshihiko pointed at the image of him still standing still with his sword sticking out.

He nodded.

"When you take a certain action, a frozen image remains behind. After a moment, you will appear nearby, but the frozen image will remain for a while."

"You idiot… Do not scare me like that," said Junko in a pouting voice.

They then heard a loud voice.

"I have lost! I will commit seppuku, so watch closely!"

Keisu sat down and opened the front of her kimono.

"H-hey, wait a second! Do not be so hasty!"

Junko tried to stop her, but Keisu was stubborn.

"Do not stop me! This is a warrior's death."

Keisu swung up her right hand and placed her left hand on her stomach.

And…

"Sorry, but could you hand me my sword?"

"No, I don't think so," replied Junko in shock.

"I insist on using full-sized swords, so I do not grapple and I do not carry a short sword. Please give me my sword."

Keisu bowed toward Junko.

"That kind of Bushido is not very popular anymore."

"I adhere to the old customs."

"Then at least carry a short sword to commit suicide with."

"I have never committed suicide before, so it never came up."

"Everyone who commits suicide is doing it for the first time! How exactly do you adhere to the old customs!?"

"Fine. Forget the old customs," said Keisu.

It was becoming clear that it was due to Keisu's personality that the conversation was growing tedious. Either he could not stand just watching on or he was just an odd person because Yoshihiko gave her some help.

"In that case, I will take on your life. Please help us."

"Help you?"

Keisu stood up.

"You only need to tell us who you are," replied Yoshihiko.

Keisu folded her arms.

"That is all?"

"Yes."

"I already stated my name: Keisu. I was sealed in here to ensure the demon king does not acquire the holy grail."

"We know that already. Where did you come from?"

"I was born to be here. That is all I know," answered Keisu.

It seemed she did not know everything either.

"But the demon king is Sai Akuto. Well, he is the demon king in the game, so would it be bad if he acquired the holy grail because we would lose the game?" Junko asked Yoshihiko.

He tilted his head.

"I don't know. However, the holy grail was not in the game originally. That means it might be dangerous if he acquires it," said Yoshihiko as he exchanged a glance with Junko.

"What are you talking about? The demon king's power was sealed within the holy grail. The demon king could not be defeated, so his power was sealed," said Keisu.

"So…the story has changed? Wait, could she be talking about reality?" muttered Junko without thinking. She then turned nervously toward Yoshihiko. "You may not be aware, but we have been involved in a fair bit of trouble related to the demon king. If she is talking about the real demon king, this could be a conspiracy much larger than a mere game."

The look on Yoshihiko's face completely changed.

"Then… What should we do?"

"For now, we need to tell Akuto about this holy grail. We should probably bring her with us, too," said Junko while looking at Keisu.

Yoshihiko nodded.

"Can you come with us?"

He held her sword out toward her and she took it while kneeling before him.

"I dedicate my life to you."

"Sorry. I don't really understand the situation, but it seems there is something we must do. I'm a bit scared because I've never felt this way before, but let's go meet him. Then I have to return to reality and begin the true battle," said Yoshihiko.

He was not speaking in his usual affected tone of voice, so Junko felt she was finally seeing his true self. He was almost certainly someone not used to fighting.

"I will help too. Do not worry."

Junko smiled toward Yoshihiko.

He smiled back and then they began walking toward the center of the crater with Keisu following.

There was a sword there.

That sword that could defeat the demon king was stabbed into a pedestal.

It was a two-handed sword with a jewel embedded on the bottom of the blade and a beautiful woman carved into the hilt. It did not look like a very practical sword outside of a game.

"This is Evil Slayer. It is the strongest sword in the game."

Yoshihiko grabbed the hilt in both hands and pulled. The sword slid out.

"Oh," said Junko without thinking.

This was because the ground began shaking as soon as he pulled the sword out.

"This was not part of the game," said Yoshihiko as he turned toward Junko.

"Then this is new as well?"

"The demon king has likely begun to move," said Keisu.

"Eh?" said Junko in surprise.

Akuto had clearly awoken within the game world quite a while ago.

However, Keisu gave the following explanation:

"The demon king was sealed in two ways. I do not know where since the appearance of the world has changed, but the demon king himself was sealed and his power was sealed in the holy grail. I do not know the demon king's whereabouts, but I do know he has awoken."

"What…? That would mean there are two demon kings," said Yoshihiko as the shaking of the earth intensified.

The black rock of the crater split. A crack 100 meters long extended from the sword's pedestal and toward them.

"Run!" shouted Yoshihiko as he pointed toward the path they had arrived on.

The three of them ran for that path.

As they did, the crack extended in the opposite direction and the rock around it began to crumble downwards.

With a great roar, a large hole appeared in the volcanic crater.

"Is it going to erupt?" asked Junko.

Once they climbed the path and arrived at the path circling the crater, they turned around and saw a shocking sight.

"Ahh!" shouted Yoshihiko.

"What is this? I have never seen this before!" cried Keisu.

The crack had already grown to a giant hole. The hole was a few hundred meters across and true darkness could be seen within. Something gigantic slowly appeared from that darkness.

It felt as if the pressure of the air had changed. This was because that gigantic being was covering the sky.

It looked like a gigantic octopus. Its skin was similar to mucous membranes and its tentacles lifted its bag-like body into the sky. It also seemed to have the body of a four-legged beast in addition to the tentacles. This monster looked like a fusion between a lion and an octopus. It shook its body as it stood up and it let out a roar toward the sky.

"What is going on?"

After saying that, Yoshihiko stood stock still while at a loss for words.

And that monster began to move. It climbed up the crater and over to the opposite side. It then travelled north with half of its body sticking up above the forest.

North would take it toward the demon king's castle.

"Is that the demon king that Keisu mentioned? Is it searching for the holy grail?" fearfully muttered Junko.

While glancing down at the information sent to her, Lily ran toward the location displayed on the map in her mana screen. Hiroshi followed while almost crying.

"Is 2V up ahead?"

"This will all be wasted effort if not! Then again, I'm going to punch whoever I find here, 2V or not!"

Lily was already worked up.

The map displayed an old apartment building in a disorderly district. It was low income district, so the residents would often not live there for long and they showed little interest in their neighbors. It was an excellent place to hide in.

Even as she arrived at the location, Lily retained some calm. She circled around the apartment building, confirmed there were only two exits, and instructed Hiroshi to enter through one of them and wait on the second floor.

"If anyone tries to get past you, talk to them to stop them. If they try to run, chase after them. You don't have to fight. Just follow them."

After making sure Hiroshi understood, Lily entered the building from the opposite side. The room in question was on the second floor.

She climbed the stairs while sliding her hand along the wall that had occasional damaged areas. She sent the elevator to the top floor and headed on her way. If she broke in right away, 2V could not use the elevator to escape.

"If I break in right away…" she muttered so as not to forget it.

Lily arrived at the door and immediately threw her fist into it with all her strength.

With a tremendous noise, the door bent in and came off its hinges. Lily kicked down the door without worrying about traps. The bent metal struck the floor and an unpleasant noise filled the area. She stepped on the door and inside the room.

The room was filled with dolls. It had no other furnishings.

A girl sat up from where she had been lying in the center of the room.

She was thin and wore shabby clothing. Her long hair was very dry and her cheeks were sunken in.

The girl's appearance caused Lily to hesitate before throwing her punch.

And that instant proved deadly. 2V may have predicted even this.

"I have hostages," said the girl in a hoarse voice.

She had the unnatural intonation of someone who had not physically spoken to another person in a long time.

The girl, 2V, displayed some footage on the mana screen next to her face.

"That game."

Lily took a defensive stance and realized what 2V meant by "hostages".

"That's right. I can erase anyone inside," said 2V.

When Lily realized this girl spoke exactly as 2V had, she cursed her own naïve hesitation.

"I should have realized only a girl would play with dolls. Well, that's hindsight for you. …But who would have thought it would be such an unhealthy and disheartening girl?"

"You shouldn't talk about people's physical appearance. Weren't you taught not to make fun of how people look? At any rate, don't try anything unless you want the students erased," said 2V quickly.

Lily could immediately tell this girl was not used to having her actual body exposed.

"I hope you aren't petty enough to slaughter the students because someone insulted you. Keh. But it's over for you either way. Whether you have them as hostages or not, it's only a matter of time before the students escape from there. It's only a game, after all. And don't think about killing them. The instant you do, I'll kill you," said Lily while suppressing her anger.

She was able to do so because she felt she had a certain amount of leeway.

However, 2V also seemed to have a certain amount of leeway despite having her true form exposed.

—Does she have some other plan?

Lily glanced searchingly around and 2V must have noticed.

"Then how about we play nice and wait here? That should be fine with both of us," said 2V lightly.

"Damn you. Why did you hack in despite knowing it risked exposing your location? Did you gain some kind of trump card?"

"A good question. But you would find out eventually if you looked into it, so I'll save you the trouble: I was checking to see what it was that already existed in the virtual alternate dimension used for this plan."

Those were shocking words to Lily.

"There was something already in the virtual alternate dimension?"

"Exactly," said 2V with an unhealthy grin.

"What is it!? That virtual alternate dimension surrounds the god Megis. Some of the priests of Megis started the Birdcage Project. Did they know about this?" asked Lily rapidly, but 2V waved a hand to stop her.

"The priests didn't know. It happened too long ago for that. In fact, the data was buried in the deepest depths of the system so they could forget. And it has been left there ever since."

"Then… what exactly is inside?" asked Lily.

2V laughed.

"Hee hee. To put it bluntly, it's the very first demon king."

"What…?" Lily gasped. "Something like that exists? You have to be joking. That's just too dangerous!"

"That's why it was put inside the virtual alternate dimension. It seems they had the same idea long ago. And I have woken it up. That original demon king has appeared as a monster in the game. I altered the program to allow that to happen."

"That's what you hacked in to do!?"

"There is a monster in the game that does not fully obey the rules. If someone is killed by it, they will not leave the virtual alternate dimension. They will truly die."

2V laughed.

"Tch! How could you do this!?"

Lily frantically opened a mana screen of her own and accessed the game's message board. The text written there could be seen within the game, too.

"I sealed off any method of communicating with those in the game. You can no longer use the game's message board."

"So those inside have to handle this?"

Lily bit her lip in frustration.

"The conclusion should be reached within a few more days in the game. That is less than an hour here. Let's wait here and watch footage of the game. Which side will win in the end? I can't wait to find out."

2V grinned.

Chapter 4: A Fairly Large Battle

The view from the castle terrace was not bad. The scenery was mostly the jungle and a rocky mountain, but that nature – or images modeled after nature – visible below the blue sky had a way of calming the heart.

Akuto stood on the terrace with a wine glass in one hand.

"Being the final boss of a game is pretty boring."

"You don't really notice it while playing the game, though," replied Keena as she stood next to him eating rice.

The sight of her scooping rice from a bowl using chopsticks did not suit that western castle.

They could not access the outside world, so they could only view the game's manual and the internal data. After checking through all that and realizing he could not comprehend the program, Akuto had little left to do.

"And we learned the holy grail is deep in the castle," complained Akuto.

He had found the game's final objective of the holy grail enshrined in the bottommost dungeon of the castle. Picking it up had done nothing. It seemed to only be the players' final objective. That meant the game would end when he was defeated and one of the players took it. Akuto did not care if that was the ending reached.

"But who changed the story?" asked Keena.

"All we know is that a lot of different factors are involved. But until we know what those are, we shouldn't try anything. …By the way, where did you find that rice?"

"It was right there! As soon as I wanted to eat it, it was there in front of me. This castle sure is convenient. It must be filled with invisible maids."

"If there are so many invisible maids, why don't we run into them?"

"Maybe they're fast, so they move out of the way."

"I'm not sure I like the idea of fast invisible maids…"

Akuto smiled bitterly and heard a voice from behind him.

"Demon king, it is I, Demon General Korone. I have come with news."

Akuto turned around to find Korone kneeling.

"Can you please stop putting on that act?"

"No. Fulfilling the game is the key to leaving this world."

"Even so… Anyway, what is it?"

"Two things. First, the program seems to have been altered a bit from outside."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"Yes, but the virtual alternate dimension is primarily influenced by the wills and actions of those inside. External changes are limited to small things outside of the fundamental factors. For example, increasing the number of enemy characters. But I cannot say what will happen, so be careful when faced with an enemy not in the manual."

The problems just kept coming.

"It would be dangerous if an enemy like that killed you, right?" said Akuto with a nod of understanding.

"Yes. Be careful. As for the other piece of news, while hunting down the remnants, I learned that the enemy is gathering together."

"Gathering together?"

"Yes. It seems they scattered, raised their level, and waited for an opportunity. If the time has come, they will advance to the castle with an army they believe can defeat you."

"That's good to hear. This game will soon come to end," said Akuto in relief.

"No, we will achieve victory by killing all of them."

"If that's what you want to do, that's fine too. Everyone is going to hate me regardless."

"Then I shall head to the fortress on the path here. …As you can see, they have begun to move."

Korone pointed beyond the terrace.

Akuto turned around and found a single trail of smoke rising from the jungle.

"Oh, it's smoke," said Keena innocently.

More and more smoke signals began to rise across the landscape.

"A lot of them survived."

"Do not worry. There are fewer than thirty survivors and each commander has no more than ten thousand soldiers. I will borrow your army. I shall surely be victorious with the twenty thousand troops of the demon king army and the geographical advantage of the fortress Korone Barrier!"

"When did you create that fortress?"

Akuto could not believe what he was hearing, but it was true Korone was helping resolve everything. He decided he could leave it to her, so he nodded toward her.

"Then I shall head out to battle. Demon king, enjoy yourself while dancing and listening to music. The invisible maids will prepare it for you," said Korone.

"Dancing and music?" complained Akuto, but Keena's cheerful voice cut in.

"Dancing and music! That's right! I forgot what mattered with a castle! It slipped my mind because there aren't very many people here!"

Keena's eyes were sparkling.

"Enjoy yourselves," said Korone as she left.

Music then began playing.

"Eh?"

"Wah! C'mon, A-chan, let's dance!"

Keena pulled on Akuto's hand.

As he saw more and more smoke signals rising, Yoshihiko nodded.

"Oh, no. The students decided their level is high enough to begin an attack on the demon king's castle," he commented.

Junko nodded with a displeased look. The giant fusion between an octopus and four-legged beast was shaking the earth as it walked in the distance ahead of them.

"Have they not noticed that monster?"

The monster was several dozen meters tall. It would be visible from a distance, but it was unlikely every single student scattered across the world had seen it.

"I doubt all of those who see it will realize it isn't a character from the game. Do we have no choice but to defeat it?"

Yoshihiko turned to Junko and Keisu.

Junko was still hesitating, but Keisu gave a powerful nod.

"I think we should defeat it. It…might be the demon king. We cannot let the demon king acquire the holy grail."

"In the game, the holy grail is in the demon king's castle and that monster is headed in that direction. Also, our contact with the outside world was cut off when this monster appeared."

Yoshihiko produced a screen in midair and checked once more.

He then nodded resolutely.

"If we can do anything, we have to do it. Let's hurry. We are quite a long way from the demon king's castle."

Yoshihiko began walking after the octopus monster.

"By the way, what happens if the demon king acquires the holy grail?" asked Junko.

Keisu readily gave a terrifying answer.

"He gains his perfect form."

"The time has come to show off our power!"

Fujiko gave her orders. The female students and the NPC armies under their command let out a cry. They were all female.

"What is that?"

"This is Etou Fujiko-sama's Amazon army!"

At the head of the military force advancing toward the demon king's castle was Fujiko riding a Cerberus and carrying a flag bearing the "E" of Etou.

Fujiko and some of the other female students had formed an alliance and quickly grown to the largest force among the students. They had done so primarily by attacking the male students.

It had begun when some of the male students had attempted to sneak into the female students' tents. The boys had decided there was no harm in peeking since this was a game, but the girls had fiercely fought back. To stop that conflict, Fujiko had suggested acting as a group.

Fujiko was popular enough that the number of girls under her command continued to grow as they travelled. The creation of a group and the comfort of it all being a game had radicalized their thinking. It became implicitly acceptable to kill any of the boys that opposed them.

This radicalization had of course been secretly instigated by Fujiko. She had been the first to realize killing fellow students gave extremely high experience. She had indirectly advocated hunting the boys to strengthen the girls allied with her.

"But Fujiko-sama is so kind…"

"If only those other girls weren't with her…"

Fujiko had mastered her villainy to the point that even the surviving boys were convinced that was true.

With Fujiko's Amazon army of seven thousand at the lead, more and more armies joined with the Anti-Demon King Alliance.

Students hidden to the left and right would join up with them as they continued along the path and those students' NPC armies would follow.

Ultimately, the alliance reached three hundred twenty thousand and it held up many different flags as it advanced. It moved toward Korone Barrier. The wide path narrowed at one point and a fortress had been constructed there. Wall-like cliffs rose up on either side of the path, making it look like a giant dried up river. The cliffs were several dozen meters tall, so one could only attack on the level of dropping rocks if one climbed up to the top. Either way, the battle came down to defeating the fortress head on.

"So it begins here."

The students' excited muttering rose up into the sky. The cliffs approached on either side and the people and horses of the army created a single black stream that looked like muddy water flowing through the dried up river with tremendous force.

A giant wall blocked the path like a dam in the river. That wall was decorated with flags bearing the word "demon".

"It's the demon king's army!"

"They haven't left the castle yet!"

"Bring out the battering ram! If we break down the gate, we win!"

The alliance continued charging forward. The one person to slow down was Fujiko.

—Heh heh. Once the students gain more experience in this battle, I will find the perfect moment to offer them to Akuto-sama. This plan is perfect! And finally, I will offer my own body up to Akuto-sama… Ahhh! Akuto-sama will kill me with his own hands… Such bliss! Just the thought of it and I can barely contain myself!

While lost in her delusions, Fujiko slowed down and hid herself within the army so that she could survive. She also surrounded herself with female students. This was a truly cowardly action, but she was amazingly able to do so without those around her growing suspicious.

Meanwhile, those at the head of the army arrived at the fortress.

One boy's army had prepared a battering ram, but a shower of arrows suddenly rained down on him and his army. Orc soldiers under Korone's command had been hiding atop the fortress and they began their attack.

"Waaaah!"

The battering ram unit was defeated.

That shower of arrows signaled the beginning of a fierce battle.

The soldiers in the lead held their shields above their heads and reached the fortress wall. They began placing ladders against the wall and desperately holding them in place. The following soldiers began climbing those ladders.

More arrows poured down. Soldiers so full of arrows they looked like hedgehogs fell from the ladders and struck the soldiers behind them.

Even so, the soldiers held their shields up and continued climbing. More and more ladders were set up and the arrows were dispersed over more points. This allowed the soldiers to make it higher and higher up the ladders before being shot down.

"This is our chance! Bring the battering ram!"

On the orders of one student, a giant log with wheels attached was pulled forward by several soldiers. The battering ram was slammed against the fortress's gate. The entire gate shook.

Some of the raining arrows turned toward them and the concentration of arrows dropped further. Finally, one of the soldiers reached the top of the gate just as the battering ram broke through it.

"Let's destroy them all!"

The students let out cries, thinking they had reversed the situation. The soldiers rushed through the gate while shouting out.

The soldiers who had climbed up the ladders began defeating the orc archers with their swords. The number of arrows raining down lessened.

The soldiers who passed through the gate ran into a group of spear-wielding goblin soldiers waiting on the other side of the wall. The demon king army formed a new wall with their spears and shields, but they only numbered several hundred. Even if they could stab the leading soldiers with their spears, they could not defend against the great number of soldiers pressing in.

The center of the dense formation was breached and the goblin soldiers scattered. The cavalry had been waiting for the downpour of arrows to finally stop, but they appeared now and shot and cut down the goblins one by one.

"We can do this!"

More and more voices cried out as they were certain of their victory.

But one person was less certain. It was Fujiko as she watched the battlefield from the very back of the army.

—This is odd. Korone should be in command here, yet I have not seen her. And there were only about twenty thousand soldiers waiting for us. No matter how difficult it is to put large numbers in this fortress, I can only assume she is saving her forces for some other purpose.

Fujiko planned to offer up the students' experience points to Akuto, so she wanted to avoid a complete defeat to Korone. And if possible, she wanted to defeat Korone herself.

—But the only place to keep the rest of her troops is on top of the cliffs.

Fujiko looked up at one cliff.

It was several dozen to a hundred meters tall. Rocks could be dropped down, but there was no sign of any large number of rocks having been prepared. Also, they would not have enough rocks to block off the path, so the army could ignore the rocks and continue on, rendering that strategy pointless. To use rocks effectively, it would be best to use them while they were concentrated at the fortress wall.

—If she was to attack with an army, it would be best to attack from the flank while we are stretched through the fortress's gate, but I see no sign of an army hiding anywhere.

And then Fujiko's thoughts were cut off.

"Gwa ha ha ha ha ha! So we meet again! Demon General Korone has arrived!"

Korone's voice rang out.

She was on top of the cliff. She must have been waiting for the alliance forces to stretch out after breaching the fortress gate because she appeared directly to the side.

"Don't be afraid! They can't hit with arrows from that distance!"

"Continue on! They can't have that many rocks!"

The male students gave instructions like that.

That was the same as what Fujiko had thought.

—But there has to be something I am missing.

Fujiko ordered the female students to stop.

And then Korone took action.

"Exterminate them!" she shouted as she ordered her troops to advance.

The orcs and goblins began jumping from the cliff one after another.

"Wha-…!?"

The soldiers down below gasped. After all, flight magic did not exist in this world. The enemy soldiers could only fall.

"Advance! Advance!"

But Korone expressionlessly ordered them onward. The soldiers of the demon king army continued jumping.

"Wh-what is she doing?"

Those watching could not believe their eyes. However, Fujiko alone realized the truth.

"We have lost. No… If we do not want to lose, we must close the fortress gate!"

Fujiko gave instructions. The female students had yet to pass through the gate, but they now shut that gate they had worked so hard to open. They also began removing the ladders.

"Wh-what are you doing!?"

The male students began to panic, but they did not have time to focus on the gate.

"Wh-what!?"

Their eyes opened wide in shock.

Corpses began piling up in front of the cliff. They of course belonged to the soldiers of the demon king army. Those corpses formed a slope which an elite unit led by Korone ran down.

"You're kidding!"

The male students were shocked and quickly routed.

Anyone with a human heart would have hesitated from using this strategy. No, it may have been possible in a normal game, but only Korone could have used such an abnormal strategy in this world that felt so real.

"Cut off their heads to be sure! Take no prisoners!"

Korone sent the elite unit in every direction. The stretched out alliance army was split into several sections and the isolated soldiers were surrounded and defeated. Korone's strategy was especially effective because she targeted the commanders. The rules of the game said a soldier would disappear once his commander had been lost. A single beam of light from Korone would eliminate thousands of soldiers.

The male students who had passed through the fortress gate were forced to flee, but Korone pursued them and took them out one by one with her beam attack.

"Damn you, Sai Akuto. How could you order Korone-chan to do this? You aren't human."

"So the truly terrible one is the demon king…"

The boys went to their deaths never doubting that Korone's cruel strategy had been Akuto's doing.

And before long, Korone had slaughtered everyone there.

Ultimately, Korone had sacrificed tens of thousands of soldiers to create a path for her thousands of soldiers which then defeated an army of hundreds of thousands.

"You monster!" shouted Fujiko from the other side of the fortress.

Only the seventy thousand troops of the girl-led Amazon army remained.

"A-chan, this war is scary."

As elegant music surrounded them, Keena clung to Akuto's arm while wearing a dress.

They were watching the battle at Korone Barrier from the terrace.

"It's only a game. But even as a game, this intensity is fairly thought provoking. Wars take up so much money, but they are so empty," said Akuto.

He was wearing white clothes as well.

"Yeah, war isn't right. But…"

Keena turned toward a table bearing a luxurious feast.

It had plain onigiri, fried rice, pilafs, doria, dry curry, rice cakes, and rice pudding. Keena held a glass of amazake.

"It feels hypocritical to say that while wearing such lovely clothes and dancing in front of so much delicious food."

"You have a point. We really are the villains here. Then again, I wouldn't call this food 'delicious'. How did it end up like this?" complained Akuto

Suddenly, he noticed a change in the scenery.

"Ah!"

"What is it?"

"Look at that."

Akuto pointed beyond the battlefield.

Something taller than the trees of the jungle was slowly walking toward them.

Keena screamed when she saw it.

"Kyah! A-A-chan. You can't go there."

Keena was clearly afraid.

"Is that the interference from outside the game that Korone was talking about?"

Akuto embraced Keena as he watched the creature. It looked like a four-legged beast with an octopus for a head. It looked evil.

"I have a really bad feeling about that thing. I'm worried."

Akuto felt Keena trembling.

That told him something was wrong more than anything. Keena was always so carefree, but this terrified her.

"A bad feeling?"

"Its presence is similar but different to yours. It's really unpleasant."

"Don't worry. You just have to stay here," said Akuto as he moved away from Keena.

"No, don't go."

"I have to. It seems to be headed this way."

The creature's movements looked slow, but it was approaching at a speed appropriate for its giant form.

"And if its presence is similar to mine, I really do have to go, right?"

Keena finally nodded her head in acceptance.

"But be careful."

"I will."

Akuto nodded and began running.

"Gwa ha ha ha ha! Bow down before me, Amazons!" shouted Korone.

The fortress gate was closed off from both sides, so the allied army had lost a large number of troops without breaking through the fortress. All that remained were the 70,000 of Fujiko's Amazon army.

Fujiko could see no way to defeat Korone who stood atop that fortress. But if they retreated, she would undoubtedly pursue them and wipe them all out.

"Onee-sama! What should we do?"

"This is not good. I would hate to admit defeat even if this is a game."

Fujiko made up her mind and raised her head.

"Demon General Korone! I challenge you to single combat!" shouted Fujiko as she stepped forward.

This was a final desperate plea that Korone had no obligation to answer, but she did so readily enough.

"Do you really think a mere human can defeat me?"

Korone opened the fortress gate and came out alone.

"When you say it, I cannot tell if you are acting or not," complained Fujiko.

—I will eventually have to fight Korone for real in the process of improving Akuto-sama. This is a good opportunity to learn how she fights.

Fujiko kicked at the Cerberus and moved quickly forward. Korone was a magician, so Fujiko and her Cerberus would be at an advantage in direct combat. If she charged forward, she could reach Korone as long as she could withstand two magical attacks.

"Beam! Beam!"

And Korone used those two attacks to their fullest. Both hit Fujiko.

"Kh!"

But Fujiko survived with a tiny amount of hit points left. She drank a recovery potion she had mixed herself and regained the health she needed to withstand direct combat. She then swung her whip at Korone.

"Did you think this would come down to our in-game stats in close quarters combat?"

Korone swung up her staff and blocked the whip. The whip wrapped around the staff.

"Our stats are meaningless. I thought I would see your fighting habits outside of your strategy."

Fujiko pulled the whip and stopped Korone's movements. If Korone let go of the staff, she would have lost her weapon. Normally, it would then come down to a comparison of strength.

However…

"There."

Korone swung the staff and moved forward.

A normal human would reflexively resist having one's movements restricted, but Korone showed no such reflex.

"Oh, no."

Korone attacked Fujiko with the handle of the staff. A physical attack from a magician did not do much damage, but it caused decent mental shock.

"You really do have tremendous resolution when it comes to combat."

"The humans known as masters show that trait as well. Any normal L'Isle-Adam combat program will take that into consideration," explained Korone indifferently as she sent down a shower of blows with the staff.

—Geh. If I have to fight Korone in the real world, I need to find some kind of weakness.

Fujiko regretted her decision, but her pride would not allow her to admit defeat.

—I need to put up a smokescreen and wait for another opportunity.

Just as Fujiko had that thought, she heard a tremendous scream from behind her.

She was so focused on Korone that she hesitated to turn around. However, she slowly turned around once she felt a shadow cover her and Korone moved back and pointed behind her.

"Ee!"

A monster stood there.

It had slimy skin, its body was that of a four-legged beast, its head was an octopus, and it was several dozen meters tall.

"Wh-what is that thing!?" said Fujiko in what was almost a scream.

Korone's response was perfectly calm.

"It is a monster that is not part of that game. It seems be attacking us. We should fall back and watch on."

Korone began moving toward the fortress gate.

"Y-yes. It is unfortunate we cannot complete our match, but we have no choice. Everyone, through the gate!"

With that instruction, Fujiko ran through the gate herself.

But as Fujiko's followers rushed toward the gate, the monster moved more quickly than expected and caught up with them. The monster did not exactly attack them. It swung the tentacles coming from its head to sweep aside the female students as if they were merely in the way.

"Kyaaah!"

Screams rang out as girls were thrown into the air where they turned to dust and disappeared.

"It seems this creature has taken on the rules of the game," commented Korone.

"That is good even if nothing else about this is."

Fujiko trembled as she looked up at the monster on the other side of the gate. Nothing stopped its advance. It brushed the girls aside, trampled them underfoot, and finally began slamming its body against the fortress.

A great rumbling ran through the earth. The fortress shook and smashed pieces of stone fell from above.

"What is this thing?"

"It seems to have been created by someone hacking in from outside and it seems to have been given some kind of objective. I believe it is pursuing that objective and nothing else."

"So if we flee, it will not bother us?"

"Most likely."

"Then we should do so right away."

Fujiko prepared to flee, but she then noticed a change come over the monster's actions. It had been trying to move forward, but it now stopped and swung its front legs up to reach a standing position. It looked like a building being lifted up by a crane or a giant object suddenly protruding up from the earth.

"Ee!"

Despite knowing this was a game, Fujiko could not suppress the fear. She understood why the monster had done that the instant she turned around to flee.

"A-Akuto-sama!"

The monster had clearly reacted to Akuto's arrival. Its emotionless eyes were following Akuto as he walked toward the fortress.

"Its objective is the demon king? How very odd," muttered Korone.

Suddenly, someone shouted out from behind the monster.

"That thing is the sealed demon king!"

It was Junko's voice.

The monster had been faster than them, so they had only caught up once it arrived at the fortress. Junko could see Korone and Fujiko beyond the gate visible between the monster's legs.

"That thing is the sealed demon king!" shouted Junko.

"The demon king? What are you talking about?" replied Fujiko.

"It seems something was sealed in this space from the beginning and external interference has brought it out!" explained Junko.

"Sealed?"

"Someone who was already in this space said it was the demon king. It might be the demon king of an earlier generation."

"Really?"

Fujiko closed her eyes in thought, looked back at the monster, and then spoke.

"It reacted when it saw Akuto-sama, so that might be true."

"Akuto is here?" asked Junko.

Fujiko nodded.

"He just arrived!"

"That monster reacted when it saw Sai Akuto?"

Junko found that odd, so she looked to Yoshihiko. However, Yoshihiko did not seem especially bothered by it.

"I wonder if there is some connection there. At any rate, we need to speak with him. If we could defeat that thing and make our way to the other side…" said Yoshihiko.

"Defeat it? I do not think the demon king can be defeated. That is why it was sealed in the first place," commented Keisu.

But Junko shook her head.

"But you saw when it defeated those students, right? Fortunately, it seems to exist as a monster in the game. That means it can be defeated."

Junko threw a shuriken at the monster's back.

The monster did not seem to care, but a wound appeared on its back.

"This can work, right?"

Junko grinned and Yoshihiko nodded.

"It's worth a shot."

The two of them began attacking the back legs of the monster with their swords. Their attacks were enough to cause it to move slightly. It had completely ignored them until they attacked, but the injuries to its legs caused it to shake its legs as if driving away an insect.

"Then I shall attack, too."

Keisu grabbed the sword on her back in preparation to draw it, but she suddenly stopped. A snake was wrapped around the scabbard. That snake had slithered up to the grip and waited for Keisu to reach behind her back.

"Nh!"

By the time Keisu noticed, it was too late.

The snake bit her hand.

All life seemed to vanish from her eyes and she stood stock still.

Neither Yoshihiko nor Junko noticed what was happening.

—Good! It worked!

The snake secretly grinned.

This was of course the green snake 2V had transformed into. It had clung to the monster's body, dropped off just before the monster reached the fortress, and hid in a nearby thicket. From there, it had waited for a good opportunity.

—It's a good thing I took the form of a snake. I just had to make a few modifications to the snake's venom!

2V left Keisu's hand and slipped inside the collar of her clothes.

2V then used a spell she specialized in. As a doll user, 2V could influence L'Isle-Adams if she concentrated her power. This was only possible in the game because 2V had rewritten that portion of the program.

The snake completely disappeared into Keisu's clothes and Keisu's body finally began moving again.

However, life did not return to her eyes. Keisu tossed her sword up to draw it, caught it in midair, and landed, but all of it was done under 2V's control.

Korone informed Akuto of the situation and he nodded when he understood the gist of it.

"You mean that character isn't in the game?"

"It seems that way."

"But it obeys the rules of the game. What is going on?"

"Either this is interference from outside the game or this is the influence of the person that existed inside the virtual alternate dimension from the beginning. I cannot say which."

"I see. But this will be a giant pain if we don't take care of it, right? It's obeying the rules of the game, so let's defeat it as a monster in the game." Akuto began giving Korone instructions. "Reorganize the NPC army. The moment the fortress falls is our chance to attack. That monster is sure to show an opening."

Korone nodded.

"As you wish."

Korone began instructing the army of orcs and goblins, but Fujiko suddenly shouted out.

"Kiiii! I wanted to play that role!"

"Is that so? Too bad," said Korone calmly.

Fujiko was blatantly angry.

"Couldn't I give up my position?"

"A class change requires a ticket. Tickets may be purchased at the online store," replied Korone mechanically.

"I was not aware this game made money like that," complained Fujiko.

Meanwhile, the monster's actions grew more fierce and wild. It had been trying to destroy the fortress, but it began writhing irregularly and slamming its giant body randomly against the fortress. Junko and Yoshihiko's attacks were proving effective.

"They are doing well. His weapon seems to be especially effective."

As she reorganized the army, Korone pointed at the monster's feet.

Yoshihiko's double-edged sword, Evil Slayer, was an amazing magic sword. The giant monster writhed to keep its back legs away from the attack and it used its tentacles solely for keeping Yoshihiko at a distance.

The monster succeeded in destroying the fortress and tried to flee beyond it just as Korone finished putting getting the army into formation. The stones making up the foundation could be heard cracking and the entire fortress began toppling toward Akuto and the others.

"It's falling!" warned Fujiko.

Akuto gave an order.

"Have the army charge toward it. They can get on top of that monster from the fortress. Have them cling to its back regardless of the crumbling stone. Make sure they can continue to attack even after it stands up."

The demon king's soldiers and demonic beasts charged straight forward even as crumbling stone poured down like rain and the walls of the fortress collapsed. Naturally, a lot of the orc soldiers and demonic beasts died miserable deaths as they were crushed beneath the rocks.

"Ahh! Such a coldhearted command! I have so much to learn from you!" exclaimed Fujiko as she writhed about.

Even if they were not human, the demonic beast soldiers looked very real. For a non-L'Isle-Adam to sacrifice them like that, Akuto's mentality was far from normal.

And his strategy worked. The fallen monster stood back up, but it was covered in orc soldiers who acted like blood-sucking ticks. The monster let out a roar and swung its tentacles around. It began striking its own body in order to knock off the orc soldiers. It succeeded in knocking a lot of them off, but it was still left with swords stabbing into it over and over again, causing continual damage.

Junko and Yoshihiko had moved away as the fortress collapsed, but they began to attack once more. Yoshihiko's Evil Slayer caused even greater damage to the monster.

"This is going to work," said Fujiko with a smile.

"Should you really say that when you have done nothing yourself?" asked Korone.

But Fujiko did not care.

"I am providing moral support for Akuto-sama."

However, Fujiko's smile froze over. The monster was either trying to escape the effects of Evil Slayer or risking everything on a single attack because its death was near. It stood up tall, gave a scream-like cry into the air, and charged directly for Akuto.

"Akuto-sama!" screamed Fujiko.

Akuto took a defensive stance.

"Don't worry. I've survived an aircraft carrier running into-…"

Akuto trailed off before he could finish.

A tentacle swept in from the side. Akuto tried to turn aside the attack, but he could not. The tentacle wrapped around his body and tossed him like a doll.

He flew over ten meters, struck the bare rock, and groaned.

"Gh!"

Akuto's body was almost buried in the rock.

"Akuto-sama!"

Fujiko cried out in concern, but Akuto replied along with a light hand motion.

"I'm fine. It seems that attack doesn't exceed the limits of the game. As long as I don't get hit a second time, I won't die in the game."

Suddenly, someone else shouted toward him. It was Junko who was slicing at the monster from behind.

"No! It seems this monster is after the holy grail in the castle, not your life! No one knows what will happen if it gets the holy grail! It might even affect the real world! This may be a game, but we might have no way of stopping this monster if you lose!"

Junko's words surprised Akuto a bit, but he quickly realized it fit with the other things he knew.

—Come to think of it, the holy grail was a change from the original game. And it said for the demon king to acquire it, but nothing happened when I picked it up despite the fact that I'm the demon king in the game. If this thing is the demon king instead…!

"Kh…"

Akuto stood up and tried to fall back to the castle, but the monster began charging at him again.

"Recovery magic."

Akuto tried to use recovery magic on himself, but realized he could not.

"In exchange for his automatic regeneration ability, the demon king cannot use recovery magic! Your magic power doesn't drop when you use magic, but it would be unfair if you could heal infinitely!" explained Yoshihiko.

"That's…not good."

Akuto prepared for death.

Despite Yoshihiko and Junko's efforts, the monster was not stopping. A tentacle attacked Akuto once more. He tried to use defense magic, but he knew it would never be enough given how much damage he took before.

"Oh, no."

Akuto cursed his own conceitedness. He had charged into battle without knowing the situation or rules and assumed it would all work out okay.

The tentacle drew closer.

Akuto reflexively closed his eyes.

He heard the sound of something large crashing into stone.

"I'm glad this is a game. Next time, I need to…"

As Akuto began to mutter to himself, he realized he felt no pain and instead felt something wrapping around his body.

—Hm? I thought you were supposed to feel pain in here.

He opened his eyes and realized he was still in the game.

"What?"

He was also floating in the air. Flying was forbidden in this game, so it should have been impossible.

—That means…

"C'mon, A-chan. You really can't do anything without me, can you?" rebuked Keena.

"I told you to stay in the castle. …But you did save me," said Akuto in relief.

Keena was flying while holding Akuto under his arms. Akuto recalled that Keena alone could ignore the rules in this world.

"But it's dangerous, so you need to head back," said Akuto as he looked down.

The monster had crashed its head into a rock wall.

"Lower me down. I need to defeat that thing."

But Keena shook her head.

"I can't. A-chan, you have a bad habit of wanting to do everything yourself. That thing is targeting you, so you should tell the others what to do."

Keena's words stabbed at Akuto because of his earlier failure.

"You're right. Trying to solve this on my own only led to failure."

Akuto sighed and shook his head decisively, and called to those below.

"Senpai! When I give the signal, blind that monster!"

"Yes, Akuto-sama!"

Fujiko nodded ecstatically.

"You two in the back, attack its legs once it's blinded to throw off its sense of direction!"

"Understood!"

Junko and Yoshihiko exchanged a glance and nodded before answering.

"Korone, use the surviving soldiers to open the monster's mouth!"

"As you wish."

As soon as Korone gave her answer, Akuto gave his signal to Fujiko.

"Senpai!"

"Understood!" replied Fujiko.

As the monster tried to stand up and regain its position, Fujiko threw a potion that produced a smokescreen.

The monster had yet to fully stand up, so the potion bottle struck it directly on the face. Despite being wrapped in white smoke, the monster stood up and tried to reach Akuto. It likely planned to jump up at the location it remembered Akuto being in.

But Junko and Yoshihiko attacked at the monster's back legs. They cut at those legs the instant it tried to put its weight on them, so it collapsed.

"Korone!"

Korone acted on Akuto's instruction. The soldiers still clinging to the monster moved to its neck and Korone fired lightning magic at them. The soldiers convulsed as the lightning struck them, but the electricity passed through their swords and into the monster those swords were stabbed into.

With a pained roar, the monster raised its jaws and revealed the mouth hidden below the tentacles.

"Keena!"

Akuto had Keena fly directly upwards and drop him.

As he fell, he fired the strongest attack magic in the game toward the monster's upturned mouth.

"Fallout!"

A nuclear explosion occurred inside the monster's mouth, tremendous heat and light shot from the octopus head, and it collapsed onto its back.

Lily shouted in joy as she saw the monster collapse on the mana screen.

"Ha ha! Looks like you lost. That original demon king was defeated!"

But 2V's expression remained unchanged.

Lily's smile gradually disappeared. 2V was clearly plotting something.

"What do you have up your sleeve?"

"Oh, it's just that this isn't over. It isn't over at all."

"It isn't over?"

"If you thought that monster was the original demon king that was sealed in the virtual alternate dimension, you're quite the idiot."

2V giggled.

Lily was shocked.

"Then the original demon king is still in there? Is that holy grail the condition for awakening it?"

"Exactly. The holy grail is a program chip stored in the virtual alternate dimension. It became the holy grail when it was brought inside the game, but it is actually a portion of the original demon king."

"So you created that monster as-…!"

"As a bluff, yes. It was meant to distract people from the real demon king. I want the original demon king to be revived. My original plan was to seal the current demon king, but I changed my mind once I realized the original demon king was there. I will have them return to the real world along with the original demon king. And of course, it doesn't matter who dies in the process."

"Wh-what? Then the original demon king is actually…"

Lily trailed off as the mana screen continued to show the game footage.

"So this ends the game."

Akuto checked on the monster's corpse and waited for it to eventually disappear.

Yoshihiko walked over and bowed his head.

"I apologize for getting you wrapped up in this."

"Are you the one behind all this?"

Akuto looked questioningly toward Yoshihiko. Yoshihiko knew this was to be expected, so he shook his head apologetically.

"I cannot deny that I am behind it. I was the one who trapped you in this virtual alternate dimension, after all. However, we still have to worry about 2V."

"2V? Of CIMO 8?" asked Akuto.

Yoshihiko nodded.

"Yes. This was 2V's plan. You could also say it was the government's plan. I know this is no excuse, but I did not know about the plan to seal the demon king in here. When I learned about it at the last second, I decided

to not cooperate. By adding in the rules of this game, I made sure no one would be killed inside and that I could speak with you."

"In that case, you actually saved me. You don't need to apologize. I'm thankful. Anyway, what is this about a demon king being in here from the beginning?"

Akuto looked toward the corpse of the monster and shook his head.

"This virtual alternate dimension is used to protect the god Megis. It seems some ancient demon king was sealed inside it. Or maybe this virtual alternate dimension was set up in the first place to seal it. Either way, it was completely forgotten about," explained Yoshihiko.

"I see. The first demon king… I find it hard to believe so suddenly, but we should be able to investigate it after safely leaving this game. Now that I know 2V is my enemy, I should be able to put together a plan once I return. By the way, I see someone else I don't recognize."

Akuto faced Keisu who stood behind Yoshihiko.

"She too was apparently already inside this virtual alternate dimension. She says she was protecting the dimension so the demon king would not be revived."

Yoshihiko called Keisu over.

At the same time, the game's corpse display time reached its end and the giant monster's corpse vanished. Keena must have sensed something because she suddenly cried out.

"Wait!"

Akuto stopped walking toward Keisu and turned around.

"What is it?"

"The bad feeling from before is still here. I still sense something unpleasant that's similar to you, A-chan," said Keena as she trembled.

"Then that wasn't the demon king?"

Akuto pointed toward where the monster's corpse had been.

"That's right… But it's definitely somewhere nearby," said Keena with a nod.

"Then it's no surprise we could defeat that monster according to the rules of the game. What should we do now?" asked Akuto as he looked around at the others.

"Even if the demon king is here, the holy grail is in the castle, right? As long as he does not acquire it, there should be no problem. How about we simply end the game here?" suggested Fujiko.

"No. If the last survivor does not acquire the holy grail, the game will not end. And we were only trying to end the game because someone who does not follow the game's rules would be able to damage us in reality," said Yoshihiko. He turned toward Akuto and added, "It seemed like 2V knew what was sealed in here. He was probably plotting to kill you here using that fact."

"Understood. Either way, I just have to win the game. But 2V is still in here. And he might be you. Sorry, but I can't fully trust you."

Akuto stared at Yoshihiko.

Junko frantically cut in.

"Wait a second. Um…I was with him. I think you can trust him."

But Yoshihiko waved his hand to say her support was not needed.

"No. It is only natural for him to not trust me. I already said I would take the blame for what I did. However, it is not as if the two of us have never met. I never expected this to be how we fulfilled our promise of playing video games together, though."

Yoshihiko winked at Akuto.

Akuto immediately realized what that wink meant. His eyes widened in surprise and he nodded.

"I see. So you look different in here because you made the rules."

"Exactly. But I still don't blame you if you don't trust me. I caused all this and I realize now just how inexperienced I am. I overlooked the importance of physical communication. She taught me just how important it is. She is quite noble and kind."

Yoshihiko smiled toward Junko.

Junko frantically shook her head.

"Stop that. That is not true at all…"

Junko tried to deny it, but she found herself unable to look Akuto in the eye. Yoshihiko made it sound like something had happened between them while they were alone together. While things had indeed happened, none of it had been romantic in nature. Even if he had said he wanted her to like him.

At any rate, the current atmosphere made it look like something had happened and she was curious what Akuto's expression would be when he realized it. In all honesty, she hoped he would look upset.

However…

"That's true. Once we get back to the real world, you should spend the day with her at least once," said Akuto.

Junko started to wobble on her feet and her vision seemed to go dark.

"Are you okay?" asked Yoshihiko as he caught Junko.

Everyone turned toward Junko.

At that exact moment, Keisu took swift action. She leaned her body forward as she ran. She quickly swiped Yoshihiko's Evil Slayer from its scabbard and charged toward Akuto.

The tip of the magic sword was accurately aimed toward Akuto's throat. Keisu's speed put incredibly force behind the blade.

But Akuto had predicted this action.

"That isn't going to work. I realized you alone do not obey the rules of this game."

Akuto had not been distracted. He avoided the quickly moving sword by jumping to the side and he slammed his fist into Keisu's gut.

"Gh!"

Keisu passed out and collapsed.

"Now your plan is at its end."

Lily cracked her knuckles.

That had likely been 2V's last resort.

"So that Keisu was the demon king. Your plan to kill Akuto is over. Can I start punching you now? I don't think I can resist much longer."

"No, no." 2V remained calm. "Unfortunately for you, my plan is not over yet. My hopes have not yet failed. I still have another trick up my sleeve. And Zero is still doing well."

"Zero? Is that the name of the original demon king?"

"Yes. Zero will grant my wish."

"Your wish? And what is that?"

"Control. I want to control everything. And the ideal existence to grant that wish is Zero. The very first…that is to say, the prototype demon king was created with the abilities needed to destroy the world ruled by the initial gods."

"Wh-what are you talking about? What exactly do you mean!?"

"You still don't get it? Zero can control artificial intelligences and cause them to malfunction. After all, the original gods were similar to modern L'Isle-Adam AIs."

This shocked Lily.

"What? And you've resurrected this person!?"

"Yes. Just watch. This will continue and it should last a while!"

2V laughed loudly.

"She was the only one not following the game's rules," said Akuto as he looked at Keisu's collapsed form.

He held his right hand out toward her and fired magic.

"Lightning."

That was the incantation for the game's lighting magic. Electricity shot down at Keisu's back. A snake slithered from her clothes, died, and turned to dust.

"What was that snake?" asked Fujiko.

"2V came here as only an arm. He might very well have become a snake," answered Yoshihiko.

"2V uses dolls to act, so he might have been able to control L'Isle-Adams," said Fujiko.

"I see," said Yoshihiko. "And Keisu is a L'Isle-Adam. That means she did nothing wrong herself."

"Then is there nothing more to worry about?" asked Akuto.

Yoshihiko nodded.

"Probably not. Your punch stopped her temporarily, but we can ask her about it once she comes to. She probably doesn't know any of the details, though. We can take our time completing the game afterwards."

"I see. Then…"

Akuto crouched down next to Keisu as he spoke.

"Watch out!" shouted Keena.

She shoved Akuto to the side.

"Eh?"

Akuto was confused and he felt a cold sensation in his gut.

"Kyaaah!"

"Akuto-sama!"

He heard screams from all around.

"Wha-…?"

Akuto realized Evil Slayer was stabbed deeply into his gut.

A sensation different from damage in the game spread across his body. His stomach felt cold, but the hand he placed there felt warmth.

"Why?"

"The sword… The sword moved on its own!" shouted Fujiko.

"It did. The sword flew. It was as if it had been waiting for this opportunity," confirmed Korone.

"Then…this sword is the original demon king? A-anyway, I need to regenerate. I just need to concentrate mana inside me and…"

Akuto tried to recover from the damage as normal, but he could not. Every time he tried to gather strength, the wound would throb.

"A-chan!"

Keena ran over and used the game's recovery magic, but it had no effect on Akuto's wound.

"We need to return you to reality before you die. You can be healed there."

Korone calmly held up her staff.

"Wh-what are you-…?"

Fujiko raised a confused voice, but Korone fired a deadly magic beam.

It splendidly shot straight through Akuto's head.

Akuto's body convulsed and his eyes closed. He had died in the game, so he turned to dust.

And Evil Slayer remained.

Everyone's eyes widened in surprise.

The sword remained floating in midair where it had been stabbing into Akuto's gut.

"Not good! The monster and Keisu were both camouflage! If the original demon king was disguised as the most powerful sword, anyone would take it with them on their quest for the holy grail! That was the trick!"

Fujiko was clever when it came to evil plans, so she caught on quickly.

"Be careful, everyone. We have no way of knowing what will happen!" warned Junko.

"The sword may only have limited power and might only be able to fly over short distances. Otherwise, it would not need anyone to carry it," said Yoshihiko.

"The holy grail is in the castle. This is dangerous, but we only have to keep the sword from heading there!"

Junko turned toward the castle.

However…

"Oh…the holy grail… Whoops. I thought it was important, so I brought it with me."

Keena pulled the holy grail out from her robe.

It was a small, shiny gold cup.

"You idiot!" shouted Fujiko, but it was too late.

Evil Slayer aka Zero flew toward Keena. She avoided it, but she was unable to stop Zero from touching the holy grail.

As soon as the holy grail and sword touched, they both burst apart and became a thin mist.

"Ah!" cried Keena in surprise.

"Oh, no. I don't know what the first demon king is, but this means the game is over. We'll all be sent back to the real world!" said Yoshihiko.

"Th-then the original demon king will be revived in the real world!?"

Junko picked up Keisu. She awoke from being knocked out, so Junko asked a question.

"Please tell us. What will happen if the original demon king is revived?"

Keisu opened her eyes as Junko shook her.

"Zero will…"

Before Keisu could finish speaking, the game ended.

Chapter 5: The Beginning of a Dream

Hiroshi sensed something unpleasant.

He looked around to figure out what it was. He quickly realized it was due to the state of the city.

He was watching the second floor of the apartment building as Lily had asked him to. He had of course been watching the scenery outside the hallway, and he had noticed something was off due to a small change in the city below.

Small sounds of destruction were rising from the city. The ground vehicles were stopped.

"What? Did something bad happen?"

Hiroshi heard a sound from above and looked up. He saw a flying bus crash into the city beyond the apartment building.

"What!?"

The bus slammed into ground and exploded. Several nearby houses were caught in the blast.

Needless to say, this was a great disaster. Hiroshi could imagine that even greater damage was occurring in the more urban part of the city.

"W-wah…"

Hiroshi was not sure if he should obey Lily's instructions or head after her, but when he saw more and more residents of the apartment start to open their doors and come out, he decided to rush to the room Lily had gone to.

When he opened the door and ran inside, he saw the student council president fighting with several dolls in a small space.

"If you're here, then help!" shouted Lily.

"Wh-what is going on!?"

Hiroshi received an answer from a thin and sickly looking girl being carried by a doll outside a broken window.

"I won."

Hiroshi figured out that the girl was 2V.

What he could not figure out was why Lily was having so much trouble with those dolls.

"President, hurry up and knock those things away!" said Hiroshi.

However, the dolls would stand back up no matter how many times Lily punched them.

"These are different from the others! They're oddly powerful."

Lily blew away the attacking dolls with her special attacks, but the dolls seemed to release their joints at the perfect timing to reduce the damage taken.

"2V! You weren't this skilled at fighting before!" roared Lily, but 2V only laughed.

"Hah! You've got it all wrong. You still don't get it. I'm not controlling them."

"What?"

"What if there was someone more skilled at using dolls than me? What if there was someone who could control multiple L'Isle-Adams at once?"

"Shut up! No one could do that! …No, wait. You can't mean…"

Lily was left speechless.

"Ha ha ha ha! That's exactly what I mean! Didn't I tell you!? Zero, the first demon king, can control all L'Isle-Adams! Zero can control all autonomous AIs! Zero is a program that was sealed within the virtual artificial dimension. That is the identity of the very first demon king. And I have already given Zero a body! I can tell Zero what to do!"

2V continued to laugh.

Hiroshi's expression changed as he listened.

"So that chaos outside is because of this!?"

"What? What's going on outside?"

Lily punched a doll away and turned around.

"The cars are stopped, a flying bus crashed, and I can hear sounds of destruction from all over," replied Hiroshi.

Lily turned back to 2V with a terrifying look on her face.

"You're using the L'Isle-Adams to destroy the city, aren't you!?"

"Ha ha ha! That wasn't my doing! While I can give orders, Zero can be a bit crazy! Now, I will be leaving."

"Wait!"

"What kind of idiot would wait just because you told them to?"

2V prepared to jump from the balcony while the doll held her, but she suddenly turned around.

"Oh, right. I may have threatened you by saying the students inside were hostages, but that was a lie. I can't interfere like that from outside. Remember that."

Lily's face reddened with anger.

"Damn you! How dare you mock me like that! Get back here!"

"I hope I never see you again. Do your best to survive here. Or maybe it would be better if you didn't survive. After all, the world might be ruled by L'Isle-Adams before long."

The doll holding 2V then disappeared from outside the window.

"2V!!!!" shouted Lily.

However, she was surrounded and could not move. She turned to Hiroshi with a pained expression.

"Do something! You're a guy, aren't you!?"

"B-but…"

Hiroshi took a few unsteady steps backwards, but one of the dolls approached him.

"O-oh, no…"

He started to run, but he suddenly felt a slight prickling pain on his wrist.

"Eh?"

He looked down at his wrist and saw the bracelet he wore as a protective charm. It had originally been a device to call in an anti-demon king combat suit, but it had lost its ability to function.

—Wh-why? Does this mean I can use it again!?

"B-Brave."

Hiroshi muttered the activation keyword.

Akuto appeared in the schoolyard he had originally disappeared from.

The students who had already returned were shocked to see the blood covering him.

"Wah!"

"Why is he covered in blood?"

The students had hated him, but they could not ignore the fact that he had been stabbed in the stomach.

"Can anyone heal him?"

"You're kidding. Didn't he have monstrous strength?"

A stir filled the schoolyard.

After a short time lag, Keena and the others appeared in the schoolyard.

"A-chan!"

Keena ran over to Akuto first and embraced his head.

"Now that I've returned, I can heal myself with my internal mana. I should be fine," said Akuto in a pained voice.

"Now that we are here, we can use the healing tools the L'Isle-Adam has, right?"

Fujiko looked around. They seemed to have appeared where they had been originally, so the only other ones of the final group in the schoolyard were Akuto, Keena, Junko, and Korone.

Keena continued calling out to Akuto.

Junko was clearly flustered as she stood next to Akuto with a pale face.

Korone was standing still.

Fujiko called out to her.

"Korone-san? Did you hear me? Heal him."

As always, Korone was expressionless. However, she seemed to have heard Fujiko because she reached into the bag she always carried.

"Yes. Hurry up and bring out your healing set."

Fujiko looked back toward Akuto.

"You will be healed soon, so-…"

Fujiko heard an ominous click behind her.

"Click?"

She turned around.

Korone held a giant weapon at her waist. It was a beam weapon that fired mana.

"Wait. That is not your healing set," said Fujiko.

Korone was obviously not listening.

"Your expression is always hard to read, but this time-…"

Korone aimed the beam weapon at Akuto.

"Watch out!" cried Fujiko.

She fired a mana sphere at Korone, but Korone ignored it and fired the beam weapon.

"You're…kidding…!"

After hearing Fujiko's voice and the sound of the mana sphere being fired, Junko turned around and noticed what was happening. However, she was an instant too late.

Korone's weapon fired a beam of light which pierced through Akuto's body.

"Gh!" groaned Akuto.

"A-chan!"

"Akuto!"

Keena and Junko cried his name at the same moment.

Fujiko's mana sphere struck Korone directly on the face, but it only knocked her to the side a bit. Korone began aiming the weapon once more.

"Wh-what are you doing, Korone!?"

"Stop, Korone-chan!"

Junko and Keena cried out again.

But Korone's expression did not change. Flames could be seen beginning to spread through the city visible behind Korone's back.

Afterword

Thank you as always. This is Mizuki Shoutarou.

This is Volume 7. I wrote it as the beginning of a new chapter. This begins a multi-volume story. I haven't decided if it will end next volume or if it will continue for longer than that. I think it is fun to have things progress as the characters dictate, so I will let them drag around in this. I hope you can enjoy this as a serialized story.

Now for the expansion into other media. A second Drama CD has been confirmed and is set to be released September 30th, 2009 by Beatniks Inc. The new characters to focus on there are Lily Shiraishi voiced by Kanda Akemi-sama and Teruya Eiko voiced by Satou Satomi-sama. You readers know what kind of person Teruya Eiko is and I am looking forward to how that will turn out.

Also, Volume 1 of Itou Souichi-san's manga version has been released by Akita Shoten, and it is still being serialized in Champion RED. When I asked him about his future plans for the manga, I was left saying "Eh!? That's going to happen!? Wow!" The end point may be the same, but the route taken is different, so I recommend it even if you have read the novels.

Now then, time for a pointless discussion.

I had some motsunabe the other day. It was amazingly good, but the timing with which to swallow the intestines always troubles me. You can only chew them 3/4 as much as your average food. But I never want to swallow it too soon, so I try to chew it too much and end up chewing forever. I wouldn't have a problem if there was some standard number of times to chew the intestines. That or a surefire method of chewing through the intestines.

Whether it's roasted or in a nabe, I await the answers from intestine lovers across the country.

Finally, my thanks.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Itou Souichi-san. Thank you for visiting me after I moved. Stop by again any time.

I give my thanks to my editor Ohashi-san. I feel I have grown a bit because I was only a little bit late for the deadline this time, but I also get the feeling it was a one-time thing. I will be aiming at speeding up from now on, too.

Also, I give my thanks to those involved with the Drama CD and everyone else. I will keep doing my best, so please stick with me.

Now then, Volume 8 is next. It will continue where this one ended. We should be able to enjoy this for a lot longer!

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